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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. 2.

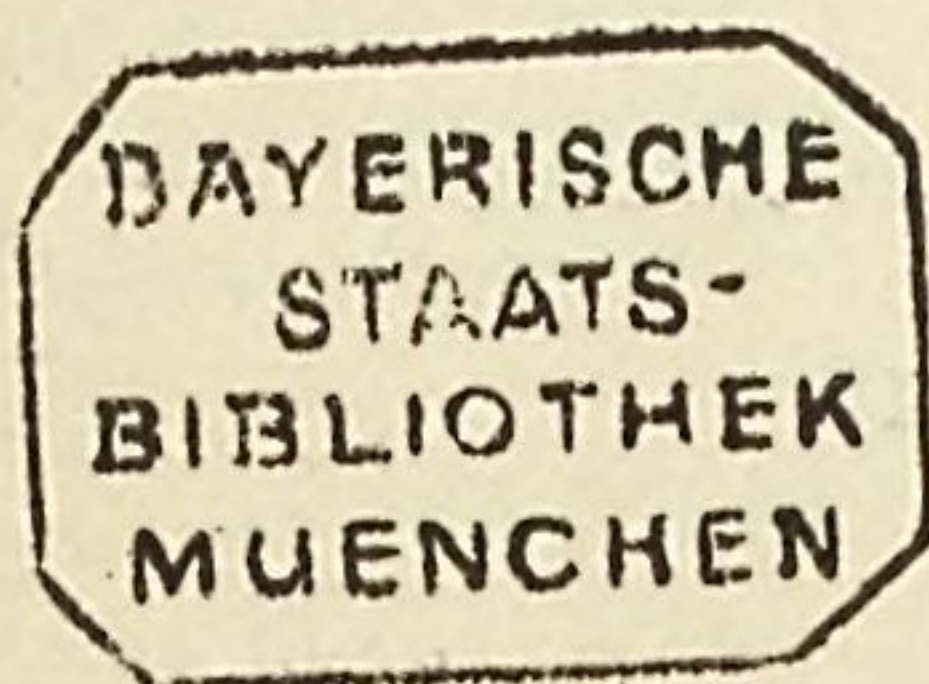
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ROBBERY UNDER ARMS

A STORY

OF LIFE AND ADVENTURE
IN THE BUSH AND IN THE GOLDFIELDS
OF AUSTRALIA

BY

ROLF BOLDERWOOD.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. II.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1889.





ROBBERY UNDER ARMS.

CHAPTER I.

As everything looked so fair-weather-like, Jim and Jeanie made it up to be married as soon after she came up as he could get a house ready. She came up to Sydney, first by sea and after that to the diggings by the coach. She was always a quiet, hardworking, good little soul, awful timid, and prudent in everything but in taking a fancy to Jim. But that's neither here nor there. Women will take fancies as long as the world lasts, and if they happen to fancy the wrong people the more obstinate they hold on to 'em. Jeanie was one of the prettiest girls I ever set eyes on in her way, very fair and clear coloured, with big, soft blue eyes, and hair like a cloud of spun silk. Nothing like her was ever seen on the field when she came up, so all the diggers said.

When they began to write to one another after we came to the Turon, Jim told her straight out that though we were doing well now it mightn't last. He thought she was a great fool to leave Melbourne when she was safe and comfortable, and come to a wild place, in a way like the Turon. Of course he was ready and willing to

marry her; but, speaking all for her own good, he advised her not. She'd better give him up and set her mind on somebody else. Girls that was anyway good-looking and kept themselves proper and decent were very scarce in Melbourne and Sydney now, considering the number of men that were making fortunes and were anxious to get a wife and settle down. A girl like her could marry anybody—most likely some one above her own rank in life. Of course she wouldn't have no one but Jim, and if he was ready to marry her, and could get a little cottage, she was ready too. She would always be his own Jeanie, and was willing to run any kind of risk so as to be with him and near him, and so on.

Starlight and I both tried to keep Jim from it all we knew. It would make things twice as bad for him if he had to turn out again, and there was no knowing the moment when we might have to make a bolt for it; and where could Jeanie go then?

But Jim had got one of his obstinate fits. He said we were regularly mixed up with the diggers now. He never intended to follow any other life, and wouldn't go back to the Hollow or take part in any fresh cross work, no matter how good it might be. Poor old Jim! I really believe he'd made up his mind to go straight from the very hour he was buckled to Jeanie; and if he'd only had common luck he'd have been as square and right as George Storefield to this very hour.

I was near forgetting about old George. My word! he was getting on faster than we were, though he hadn't a golden hole. He was goldfinding in a different way, and no mistake. One day we saw a stoutish man drive up Main street to the camp, with a well-groomed horse, in a dogcart, and a servant with him; and who was this but

old George? He didn't twig us. He drove close alongside of Jim, who was coming back from the creek, where he'd been puddling, with two shovels and a pick over his shoulder, and a pair of old yellow trousers on, and him splashed up to the eyes. George didn't know him a bit. But we knew him and laughed to ourselves to see the big swell we had grown into. He stopped at the camp and left his dogcart outside with his man. Next thing we saw was the Commissioner walking about outside the camp with him, and talking to him just as if he was a regular intimate friend.

The Commissioner, that was so proud that he wouldn't look at a digger or shake hands with him, not if he was a young marquis, as long as he was a digger. "No!" he used to say, "I have to keep my authority over these thousands and tens of thousands of people, some of them very wild and lawless, principally by moral influence, though, of course, I have the Government to fall back upon. To do that I must keep up my position, and over familiarity would be the destruction of it." When we saw him shaking hands with old George and inviting him to lunch we asked one of the miners next to our claim if he knew what that man's name and occupation was there.

"Oh!" he says, "I thought everybody knew him. That's Storefield, the great contractor. He has all the contracts for horse-feed for the camps and police stations; nearly every one between here and Kiandra. He's took 'em lucky this year, and he's making money hand over fist."

Well done, steady old George! No wonder he could afford to drive a good horse and a swell dogcart. He was getting up in the world. We were a bit more astonished when we heard the Commissioner say—

"I am just about to open Court, Mr. Storefield. Would you mind taking a few cases with me this morning?"

We went into the Court-house just for a lark. There was old George sitting on the bench as grave as a judge, and a rattling good magistrate he made too. He disagreed from the Commissioner once or twice, and showed him where he was right, too, not in the law but in the facts of the case, where George's knowing working men and their ways gave him the pull. He wasn't over sharp and hard either, like some men directly they're raised up a bit, just to show their power. But just seemed to do a fair thing, neither too much one way or the other. George stayed and had lunch at the camp with the Commissioner when the Court was adjourned, and he drove away afterwards with his upstanding eighty-guinea horse—horses was horses in those days—just as good a gentleman to look at as anybody. Of course we knew there was a difference, and he'd never get over a few things he'd missed when he was young, in the way of education. But he was liked and respected for all that, and made welcome everywhere. He was a man as didn't push himself one bit. There didn't seem anything but his money and his good-natured honest face, and now and then a bit of a clumsy joke, to make him a place. But when the swells make up their minds to take a man in among themselves they're not half as particular as commoner people; they do a thing well when they're about it.

So George was hail-fellow-well-met with all the swells at the camp, and the bankers and big storekeepers, and the doctors and lawyers and clergymen, all the nobs there were at the Turon; and when the Governor himself and his lady came up on a visit to see what the place was like, why George was taken up and introduced

as if he'd been a regular blessed curiosity in the way of contractors, and his Excellency hadn't set eyes on one before.

"My word! Dick," Jim says, "it's a murder he and Aileen didn't cotton to one another in the old days. She'd have been just the girl to have fancied all this sort of swell racket, with a silk gown and dressed up a bit. There isn't a woman here that's a patch on her for looks, is there now, except Jeanie, and she's different in her ways."

I didn't believe there was. I began to think it over in my own mind, and wonder how it came about that she'd missed all her chances of rising in life, and if ever a woman was born for it she was. I couldn't help seeing whose fault it was that she'd been kept back and was now obliged to work hard, and almost ashamed to show herself at Bargo and the other small towns; not that the people were ever shy of speaking to her, but she thought they might be, and wouldn't give them a chance. In about a month up comes Jeanie Morrison from Melbourne, looking just the same as the very first evening we met Kate and her on the St. Kilda beach. Just as quiet and shy and modest-looking—only a bit sadder, and not quite so ready to smile as she'd been in the old days. She looked as if she'd had a grief to hide and fight down since then. A girl's first sorrow when something happened to her love! They never look quite the same afterwards. I've seen a good many, and if it was real right down love, they were never the same in looks or feelings afterwards. They might "get over it," as people call it; but that's a sort of healing over a wound. It don't always cure it, and the wound often breaks out again and bleeds afresh.

Jeanie didn't look so bad, and she was that glad to

see Jim again and to find him respected as a hard-working well-to-do miner that she forgot most of her disappointments and forgave him his share of any deceit that had been practised upon her and her sister. Women are like that. They'll always make excuses for men they're fond of and blame anybody else that can be blamed or that's within reach. She thought Starlight and me had the most to do with it—perhaps we had; but Jim could have cut loose from us any time before the Momberah cattle racket much easier than he could now. I heard her say once that she thought other people were much more to blame than poor James—people who ought to have known better, and so on. By the time she had got to the end of her little explanation Jim was completely whitewashed of course. It had always happened to him, and I suppose always would. He was a man born to be helped and looked out for by everyone he came near.

Seeing how good-looking Jeanie was thought, and how all the swells kept crowding round to get a look at her, if she was near the bar, Kate wanted to have a ball and show her off a bit. But she wouldn't have it. She right down refused and close upon quarrelled with Kate about it. She didn't take to the glare and noise and excitement of Turon at all. She was frightened at the strange-looking men that filled the streets by day and the hall at the Prospectors' by night. The women she couldn't abide. Anyhow she wouldn't have nothing to say to them. All she wanted—and she kept at Jim day after day till she made him carry it out—was for him to build or buy a cottage, she didn't care how small, where they could go and live quietly together. She would cook his meals and mend his clothes, and they would come

into town on Saturday nights only and be as happy as kings and queens. She didn't come up to dance or flirt, she said, in a place like Turon, and if Jim didn't get a home for her she'd go back to her dressmaking at St. Kilda. This woke up Jim, so he bought out a miner who lived a bit out of the town. He had made money and wanted to sell his improvements and clear out for Sydney. It was a small four-roomed weatherboard cottage, with a bark roof, but very neatly put on. There was a little creek in front, and a small flower garden, with rose trees growing up the verandah posts. Most miners, when they're doing well, make a garden. They take a pride in having a neat cottage and everything about it ship-shape. The ground, of course, didn't belong to him, but he held it by his miner's right. The title was good enough, and he had a right to sell his goodwill and improvements.

Jim gave him his price and took everything, even to the bits of furniture. They weren't much, but a place looks awful bare without them. The dog, and the cock and hens he bought too. He got some real nice things in Turon—tables, chairs, sofas, beds, and so on; and had the place lined and papered inside, quite swell. Then he told Jeanie the house was ready, and the next week they were married. They were married in the church—that is, the iron building that did duty for one. It had all been carted up from Melbourne—framework, roof, seats, and all—and put together at Turon. It didn't look so bad after it was painted, though it was awful hot in summer.

Here they were married, all square and regular, by the Scotch clergyman. He was the first minister of any kind that came up to the diggings, and the men had all

come to like him for his straightforward, earnest way of preaching. Not that we went often, but a good few of us diggers went every now and then just to show our respect for him; and so Jim said he'd be married by Mr. Mackenzie and no one else. Jeanie was a Presbyterian, so it suited her all to pieces.

Well, the church was chock-full. There never was such a congregation before. Lots of people had come to know Jim on the diggings, and more had heard of him as a straightgoing, good-looking digger, who was free with his money and pretty lucky. As for Jeanie, there was a report that she was the prettiest girl in Melbourne, and something of that sort, and so they all tried to get a look at her. Certainly, though there had been a good many marriages since we had come to the Turon, the church had never held a handsomer couple. Jeanie was quietly dressed in plain white silk. She had on a veil; no ornaments of any kind or sorts. It was a warmish day, and there was a sort of peach-blossom colour on her cheeks that looked as delicate as if a breath of air would blow it away. When she came in and saw the crowd of bronze-bearded faces and hundreds of strange eyes bent on her, she turned quite pale. Then the flush came back on her face, and her eyes looked as bright as some of the sapphires we used to pick up now and then out of the river bed. Her hair was twisted up in a knot behind; but even that didn't hide the lovely colour nor what a lot there was of it. As she came in with her slight figure and modest sweet face that turned up to Jim's like a child's, there was a sort of hum in the church that sounded very like breaking into a cheer.

Jim certainly was a big upstanding chap, strong built but active with it, and as fine a figure of a man as you'd

see on the Turon or any other place. He stood about six feet and an inch, and was as straight as a rush. There was no stiffness about him either. He was broad-shouldered and light flanked, quick on his pins, and as good a man—all-round—with his hands as you could pick out of the regular prize ring. He was as strong as a bullock, and just as good at the end of a day as at the start. With the work we'd had for the last five or six months we were all in top condition, as hard as a board and fit to work at any pace for twenty-four hours on end. He had an open, merry, laughing face, had Jim, with straight features and darkish hair and eyes. Nobody could ever keep angry with Jim. He was one of those kind of men that could fight to some purpose now and then, but that most people found it very hard to keep bad friends with.

Besides the miners, there were lots of other people in church who had heard of the wedding and come to see us. I saw Starlight and the two Honourables, dressed up as usual, besides the Commissioner and the camp officers; and more than that, the new Inspector of Police, who'd only arrived the day before. Sir Ferdinand Morninger, even he was there, dividing the people's attention with the bride. Besides that who should I see but Bella and Maddie Barnes and old Jonathan. They'd ridden into the Turon, for they'd got their riding habits on, and Bella had the watch and chain Starlight had given her. I saw her look over to where he and the other two were, but she didn't know him again a bit in the world. He was sitting there looking as if he was bored and tired with the whole thing—hadn't seen a soul in the church before, and didn't want to see 'em again.

I saw Maddie Barnes looking with all her eyes at

Jim, while her face grew paler. She hadn't much colour at the best of times, but she was a fine-grown, lissom, good-looking girl for all that, and as full of fun and games as she could stick. Her eyes seemed to get bigger and darker as she looked, and when the parson began to read the service she turned away her head. I always thought she was rather soft on Jim, and now I saw it plain enough. He was one of those rattling, jolly kind of fellows that can't help being friendly with every girl he meets, and very seldom cares much for any one in particular. He had been backward and forward a good deal with father before we got clear of Berrima, and that's how poor Maddie had come to take the fancy so strong and set her heart upon him.

It must be hard lines for a woman to stand by, in a church or anywhere else, and see the man she loves given away, for good and all, buckled hard and fast to another woman. Nobody took much notice of poor Maddie, but I watched her pretty close, and saw the tears come into her eyes, though she let 'em run down her face before she'd pull out her handkerchief. Then she put up her veil and held up her head with a bit of a toss, and I saw her pride had helped her to bear it. I don't suppose anybody else saw her, and if they did they'd only think she was cryin' for company—as women often do at weddings and all kinds of things. But I knew better. She wouldn't peach, poor thing! Still, I saw that more than one or two knew who we were and all about us that day.

We'd only just heard that the new Inspector of Police had come on to the field; so of course everybody began to talk about him and wanted to have a look at him. Next to the Commissioner and the P.M., the Inspector of

Police is the biggest man in a country town or on a gold-field. He has a tremendous lot of power, and, inside of the law, can do pretty much what he pleases. He can arrest a man on suspicion and keep him in gaol for a month or two. He can have him remanded from time to time for further evidence, and make it pretty hot for him generally. He can let him out when he proves innocent, and nobody can do anything. All he has to say is: "There was a mistake in the man's identity;" or, "not sufficient proof." Anything of that sort. He can walk up to any man he likes (or dislikes) and tell him to hold up his hands for the handcuffs, and shoot him if he resists. He has servants to wait on him, and orderly troopers to ride behind him; a handsome uniform like a cavalry officer; and if he's a smart, soldierly, good-looking fellow, as he very often is, he's run after a good deal and can hold his head as high as he pleases. There's a bit of risk sometimes in apprehending desperate—ahem!—bad characters, and with bushrangers and people of that sort, but nothing more than any young fellow of spirit would like mixed up with his work. Very often they're men of good family in the old country that have found nothing to do in this, and have taken to the police. When it was known that this Ferdinand Morringer was a real baronet and had been an officer in the Guards, you may guess how the flood of goldfields' talk rose and flowed and foamed all round him. It was Sir Ferdinand this and Sir Ferdinand that wherever you went. He was going to lodge at the Royal. No, of course he was going to stay at the camp! He was married and had three children. Not a bit of it; he was a bachelor, and he was going to be married to Miss Ingersoll, the daughter of the bank manager of the Bank of New Holland. They'd

met abroad. He was a tall, fine-looking man. Not at all, only middle-sized; hadn't old Major Trenck, the superintendent of police, when he came to enlist and said he had been in the Guards, growled out, "Too short for the Guards!"

"But I was not a private," replied Sir Ferdinand.

"Well, anyhow there's a something about him. Nobody can deny he looks like a gentleman; my word, he'll put some of these Weddin Mountain chaps thro' their facin's, you'll see," says one miner.

"Not he," says another; "not if he was ten baronites in one; all the same, he's a manly-looking chap and shows blood."

This was the sort of talk we used to hear all round us—from the miners, from the store-keepers, from the mixed mob at the Prospectors' Arms, in the big room at night, and generally all about. We said nothing, and took care to keep quiet, and do and say nothing to be took hold of. All the same, we were glad to see Sir Ferdinand. We'd heard of him before from Goring and the other troopers; but he'd been on duty in another district, and hadn't come in our way.

One evening we were all sitting smoking and yarning in the big room of the hotel, and Jim, for a wonder—we'd been washing up—when we saw one of the camp gentlemen come in, and a strange officer of police with him. A sort of whisper ran through the room, and everybody made up their minds it was Sir Ferdinand. Jim and I both looked at him.

"Wa-al!" said one of our Yankee friends, "what 'yur twistin' your necks at like a flock of geese in a corn patch? How d'ye fix it that a lord's better'n any other man?"

"He's a bit different, somehow," I says. "We're not goin' to kneel down or knuckle under to him, but he don't look like anyone else in this room, does he?"

"He's no slouch, and he looks yer square and full in the eye like a hunter," says Arizona Bill; "but durn my old buckskins if I can see why you Britishers sets up idols and such and worship 'em, in a colony, jest's if yer was in that benighted old England again."

We didn't say any more. Jim lit his pipe and smoked away, thinking, perhaps, more whether Sir Ferdinand was anything of a revolver shot, and if he was likely to hit him (Jim) at 40 or 50 yards, in case such a chance should turn up, than about the difference of rank and such things.

While we were talking we saw Starlight and one of the Honourables come in and sit down close by Sir Ferdinand, who was taking his grog at a small table, and smoking a big cigar. The Honourable and he jumps up at once and shook hands in such a hurry so as we knew they'd met before. Then the Honourable introduces Starlight to Sir Ferdinand. We felt too queer to laugh, Jim and I, else we should have dropped off our seats when Starlight bowed as grave as a judge, and Sir Ferdinand (we could hear) asked him how many months he'd been out in the colony, and how he liked it?

Starlight said it wasn't at all a bad place when you got used to it, but he thought he should try and get away before the end of the year.

We couldn't help sniggerin' a bit at this, 'specially when Arizona Bill said, "Thar's another durned fool of a Britisher; look at his eyeglass! I wonder the field has not shaken some of that cussed foolishness out of him by this time."

CHAPTER II.

JIM and his wife moved over to the cottage in Specimen Gully; the miners went back to their work, and there was no more talk or bother about the matter. Something always happened every day at the Turon which wiped the last thing clean out of people's mind. Either it was a big nugget, or a new reef, or a tent robbery, a gold-buyer stuck up and robbed in the Ironbarks, a horse-stealing match, a fight at a dance-house, or a big law case. Accidents and offences happened every day, and any of them was enough to take up the whole attention of every digger on the field till something else turned up.

Not that we troubled our heads over much about things of this sort. We had set our minds to go on until our claims were worked out, or close up; then to sell out, and with the lot we'd already banked to get down to Melbourne and clear out. Should we ever be able to manage that? It seemed getting nearer, nearer, like a star that a man fixes his eyes on as he rides through a lonely bit of forest at night. We had all got our eyes fixed on it, Lord knows, and were working double tides, doing our very best to make up a pile worth while leaving the country with. As for Jim, he and his little wife seemed that happy that he grudged every minute he spent away from her. He worked as well as ever—better, indeed, for he never took his mind from his piece of work, whatever it was, for a second. But the very minute his shift was over Jim was away along the road to Specimen Gully, like a cow going back to find her calf. He hardly stopped to light his pipe now, and we'd only seen him once up town, and that was on a Saturday night with Jeanie on his arm.

Well, the weeks passed over, and at long last we got on as far in the year as the first week in December. We'd given out that we might go somewhere to spend our Christmas. We were known to be pretty well in, and to have worked steady all these months since the early part of the year. We had paid our way all the time, and could leave at a minute's notice without asking any man's leave.

If we were digging up gold like potatoes we weren't the only ones. No, not by a lot. There never was a richer patch of alluvial, I believe, in any of the fields, and the quantity that was sent down in one year was a caution. Wasn't the cash scattered about then? Talk of money, it was like the dirt under your feet—in one way, certainly—as the dirt was more often than not full of gold.

We could see things getting worse on the field after a bit. We didn't set up to be any great shakes ourselves, Jim and I; but we didn't want the field to be overrun by a set of scoundrels that were the very scum of the earth, let alone the other colonies. We were afraid they'd go in for some big foolish row, and we should get dragged in for it. That was exactly what we didn't want.

With the overflowing of the gold, as it were, came such a town and such a people to fill it, as no part of Australia had ever seen before. When it got known by newspapers, and letters from the miners themselves to their friends at home, what an enormous yield of gold was being dug out of the ground in such a simple fashion, all the world seemed to be moving over. At that time nobody could tell a lie hardly about the tremendous quantity that was being got and sent away every week.

This was easy to know, because the escort returns were printed in all the newspapers every week; so everybody could see for themselves what pounds and hundred-weights and tons—yes, tons of gold—were being got by men who very often, as like as not, hadn't to dig above twenty or thirty feet for it, and had never handled a pick or a shovel in their lives before they came to the Turon.

There were plenty of good men at the diggings. I will say this for the regular miners, that a more manly, straightgoing lot of fellows no man ever lived among. I wish we'd never known any worse. We were not what might be called highly respectable people ourselves—still, men like us are only half-and-half bad, like a good many more in this world. They're partly tempted into doing wrong by opportunity, and kept back by circumstances from getting into the straight track afterwards. But on every goldfield there's scores and scores of men that always hurry off there like crows and eagles to a carcass to see what they can rend and tear and fatten upon. They ain't very particular whether it's the living or the dead, so as they can gorge their fill. There was a good many of this lot at the Turon, and though the diggers gave them a wide berth, and helped to run them down when they'd committed any crime, they couldn't be kept out of sight and society altogether.

We used to go up sometimes to see the gold escort start. It was one of the regular sights of the field, and the miners that were off shift and people that hadn't much to do generally turned up on escort day. The gold was taken down to Sydney once a week in a strong express waggon—something like a Yankee coach, with leather springs and a high driving seat; so that four

horses could be harnessed. One of the police sergeants generally drove, a trooper fully armed with rifle and revolver on the box beside him. In the back seat sat two more troopers with their Sniders ready for action; two rode a hundred yards ahead, and another couple about the same distance behind.

We always noticed that a good many of the sort of men that never seemed to do any digging and yet always had good clothes and money to spend used to hang about when the escort was starting. People in the crowd 'most always knew whether it was a "big" escort or a "light" one. It generally leaked out how many ounces had been sent by this bank and how much by that; how much had come from the camp, for the diggers who did not choose to sell to the banks were allowed to deposit their gold with an officer at the camp, where it was carefully weighed, and a receipt given to them stating the number of ounces, pennyweights, and grains. Then it was forwarded by the escort, deducting a small percentage for the carriage and safe keeping. Government did not take all the risk upon itself. The miner must run his chance if he did not sell. But the chance was thought good enough; the other thing was hardly worth talking about. Who was to be game to stick up the Government escort, with eight police troopers, all well armed and ready to make a fight to the death before they gave up the treasure committed to their charge? The police couldn't catch all the horse-stealers and bushrangers in a country that contained so many millions of acres of waste land; but no one doubted that they would make a first-rate fight, on their own ground as it were, and before they'd let anything be taken away from them that had been counted out, box by box, and given into their charge.

We had as little notion of trying anything of the sort ourselves then as we had of breaking into the Treasury in Sydney by night. But those who knew used to say that if the miners had known the past history of some of the men that used to stand up and look on, well dressed or in regular digger rig, as the gold boxes were being brought out and counted into the escort drag, they would have made a body-guard to go with it themselves when they had gold on board, or have worried the Government into sending twenty troopers in charge instead of six or eight.

One day, as Jim and I happened to be at the camp just as the escort was starting, the only time we'd been there for a month, we saw Warrigal and Moran standing about. They didn't see us; we were among a lot of other diggers, so we were able to take them out of winding a bit.

They were there for no good, we agreed. Warrigal's sharp eyes noted everything about the whole turn-out—the sergeant's face that drove, the way the gold boxes were counted out and put in a kind of fixed locker underneath the middle of the coach. He saw where the troopers sat before and behind, and I'll be bound came away with a wonderful good general idea of how the escort travelled, and of a good many things more about it that nobody guessed at. As for Moran, we could see him fix his eyes upon the sergeant who was driving, and look at him as if he could look right through him. He never took his eyes off him the whole time, but glared at him like a maniac; if some of his people hadn't given him a shove as they passed he would soon have attracted people's attention. But the crowd was too busy looking at the well-conditioned prancing horses and

the neatly got up troopers of the escort drag to waste their thoughts upon a common bushman, however he might stare. When he turned away to leave he ground out a red-hot curse betwixt his teeth. It made us think that Warrigal's coming about with him on this line counted for no good.

They slipped through the crowd again, and, though they were pretty close, they never saw us. Warrigal would have known us however we might have been altered, but somehow he never turned his head our way. He was like a child, so taken up with all the things he saw that his great-grandfather might have jumped up from the Fish River Caves, or wherever he takes his rest, and Warrigal would never have wondered at him.

"That's a queer start!" says Jim, as we walked on our homeward path. "I wonder what those two crawling, dingo-looking beggars were here for? Never no good. I say, did you see that fellow Moran look at the sergeant as if he'd eat him? What eyes he has, for all the world like a black snake! Do you think he's got any particular down on him?"

"Not more than on all police. I suppose he'd rub them out, every mother's son, if he could. He and Warrigal can't stick up the escort by themselves."

We managed to get a letter from home from time to time now we'd settled, as it were, at the Turon. Of course they had to be sent in the name of Henderson, but we called for them at the post-office, and got them all right. It was a treat to read Aileen's letters now. They were so jolly and hopeful-like besides what they used to be. Now that we'd been so long, it seemed years, at the diggings, and were working hard, doing well, and getting quite settled, as she said, she believed

that all would go right, and that we should be able really to carry out our plans of getting clear away to some country where we could live safe and quiet lives. Women are mostly like that. They first of all believe all that they're afraid of will happen. Then, as soon as they see things brighten up a bit, they're as sure as fate everything's bound to go right. They don't seem to have any kind of feeling between. They hate making up their minds, most of 'em as I've known, and jump from being ready to drown themselves one moment to being likely to go mad with joy another. Anyhow you take 'em, they're better than men, though. I'll never go back on that.

So Aileen used to send me and Jim long letters now, telling us that things were better at home, and that she really thought mother was cheerfuller and stronger in health than she'd been ever since—well, ever since—that had happened. She thought her prayers had been heard, and that we were going to be forgiven for our sins and allowed, by God's mercy, to lead a new life. She quite believed in our leaving the country, although her heart would be nearly broken by the thought that she might never see us again, and a lot more of the same sort.

Poor mother! she had a hard time of it if ever anyone ever had in this world, and none of it her own fault as I could ever see. Some people gets punished in this world for the sins other people commit. I can see that fast enough. Whether they get it made up to 'em afterwards, of course I can't say. They ought to, anyhow, if it can be made up to 'em. Some things that are suffered in this world can't be paid for, I don't care how they fix it.

More than once, too, there was a line or two on a scrap of paper slipped in Aileen's letters from Gracey

Storefield. She wasn't half as good with the pen as Aileen, but a few words from the woman you love goes a long way, no matter what sort of a fist she writes. Gracey made shift to tell me she was so proud to hear I was doing well; that Aileen's eyes had been twice as bright lately; that mother looked better than she'd seen her this years; and if I could get away to any other country she'd meet me in Melbourne, and would be, as she'd always been, "your own Gracey"—that's the way it was signed.

When I read this I felt a different man. I stood up and took an oath—solemn, mind you, and I intended to keep it—that if I got clear away I'd pay her for her love and true heart with my life, what was left of it, and I'd never do another crooked thing as long as I lived. Then I began to count the days to Christmas.

I wasn't married like Jim, and it not being very lively in the tent at night, Arizona Bill and I mostly used to stroll up to the Prospectors' Arms. We'd got used to sitting at the little table, drinking our beer or what not, smoking our pipes and listening to all the fun that was going on. Not that we always sat in the big hall. There was a snug little parlour beside the bar that we found more comfortable, and Kate used to run in herself when business was slack enough to leave the barmaid; then she'd sit down and have a good solid yarn with us.

She made a regular old friend of me, and, as she was a handsome woman, always well dressed, with lots to say and plenty of admirers, I wasn't above being singled out and made much of. It was partly policy, of course. She knew our secret, and it wouldn't have done to have let her let it out or be bad friends, so that we

should be always going in dread of it. So Jim and I were always mighty civil to her, and I really thought she'd improved a lot lately and turned out a much nicer woman than I thought she could be.

We used to talk away about old times, regular confidential, and though she'd great spirits generally, she used to change quite sudden sometimes and say she was a miserable woman, and wished she hadn't been in such a hurry and married as she had. Then she'd crack up Jeanie, and say how true and constant she'd been, and how she was rewarded for it by marrying the only man she ever loved. She used to blame her temper; she'd always had it, she said, and couldn't get rid of it; but she really believed, if things had turned out different, she'd have been a different woman, and any man she really loved would never have had no call to complain. Of course I knew what all this meant, but thought I could steer clear of coming to grief over it.

That was where I made the mistake. But I didn't think so then, or how much hung upon careless words and looks.

Well, somehow or other she wormed it out of me that we were off somewhere at Christmas. Then she never rested till she'd found out that we were going to Melbourne. After that she seemed as if she'd changed right away into somebody else. She was that fair and soft-speaking and humble-minded that Jeanie couldn't have been more gentle in her ways; and she used to look at me from time to time as if her heart was breaking. I didn't believe that, for I didn't think she'd any heart to break.

One night, after we'd left about 12 o'clock, just as the house shut up, Arizona Bill says to me—

"Say, pard, have yer fixed it up to take that young woman along when you pull up stakes?"

"No," I said; "isn't she a married woman? and, besides, I haven't such a fancy for her as all that comes to."

"Ye heven't?" he said, speaking very low, as he always did, and taking the cigar out of his mouth—Bill always smoked cigars when he could get them, and not very cheap ones either; "well, then, I surmise you're lettin' her think quite contrairy, and there's bound to be a muss if you don't hide your tracks and strike a trail she can't foller on."

"I begin to think I've been two ends of a dashed fool; but what's a man to do?"

"See here, now," he said; "you hev two cl'ar weeks afore ye. You slack off and go slow; that'll let her see you didn't sorter cotton to her more'n's in the regulations."

"And have a row with her?"

"Sartin," says Bill, "and hev the shootin' over right away. It's a plaguey sight safer than letting her carry it in her mind, and then laying for yer some day when ye heven't nary thought of Injuns in your head. That's the very time a woman like her's bound to close on yer and lift yer ha'r if she can."

"Why, how do you know what she's likely to do?"

"I've been smokin', pard, while you hev bin talkin', sorter careless like. I've had my eyes open and seen Injun sign mor'n once or twice either. I've hunted with her tribe afore, I guess, and old Bill ain't forgot all the totems and the war paint."

After this Bill fresh lit his cigar, and wouldn't say any more. But I could see what he was driving at, and I settled to try all I knew to keep everything right and square till the time came for us to make our dart.

I managed to have a quiet talk with Starlight. He thought that by taking care, being very friendly, but not too much so, we might get clean off, without Kate or anyone else being much the wiser.

Next week everything seemed to go on wheels—smooth and fast, no hitches anywhere. Jim reckoned the best of our claim would be worked out by the 20th of the month, and we'd as good as agreed to sell our shares to Arizona Bill and his mate, who were ready, as Bill said, "to plank down considerable dollars" for what remained of it. If they got nothing worth while, it was the fortune of war, which a digger never growls at, no matter how hard hit he may be. If they did well, they were such up and down good fellows, and such real friends to us, that we should have grudged them nothing.

As for Jeanie, she was almost out of her mind with eagerness to get back to Melbourne and away from the diggings. She was afraid of many of the people she saw, and didn't like others. She was terrified all the time Jim was away from her, but she would not hear of living at the Prospectors' Arms with her sister.

"I know where that sort of thing leads to," she said; "let us have our own home, however rough."

Kate went out to Specimen Gully to see her sister pretty often, and they sat and talked and laughed, just as they did in old times, Jeanie said. She was a simple little thing, and her heart was as pure as quartz crystal. I do really believe she was no match for Kate in any way. So the days went on. I didn't dare stay away from the Prospectors' Arms, for fear she'd think I wanted to break with her altogether, and yet I was never altogether comfortable in her company. It wasn't her fault, for she laid herself out to get round us all, even old

Arizona Bill, who used to sit solemnly smoking, looking like an Indian chief or a graven image, until at last his brick-coloured, grizzled old face would break up all of a sudden, and he'd laugh like a youngster. As the days drew nigh Christmas I could see a restless expression in her face that I never saw before. Her eyes began to shine in a strange way, and sometimes she'd break off short in her talk and run out of the room. Then she'd pretend to wish we were gone, and that she'd never seen us again. I could hardly tell what to make of her, and many a time I wished we were on blue water and clear away from all chance of delay and draw-back.

CHAPTER III.

WE made up our minds to start by Saturday's coach. It left at night and travelled nigh a hundred miles by the same hour next morning. It's more convenient for getting away than the morning. A chap has time for doing all kinds of things just as he would like; besides, a quieter time to slope than just after breakfast. The Turon daily mail was well horsed and well driven. Nightwork though it was, and the roads dangerous in places, the five big double-reflector lamps, one high up over the top of the coach in the middle with two pair more at the side, made everything plain. We Cornstalks never thought of more than the regular pair of lamps, pretty low down, too, before the Yankee came and showed us what cross-country coaching was. We never knew before. My word, they taught us a trick or two. All about riding came natural, but a heap of dodges about harness we never so much as heard of till they came to the country with the gold rush.

We'd made all our bits of preparations, and thought nothing stood in the way of a start next evening. This was Friday. Jim hadn't sold his bits of traps, because he didn't want it to be known he wasn't coming back. He left word with a friend he could trust, though, to have 'em all auctioned and the goodwill of his cottage, and to send the money after him. My share and his in the claim went to Arizona Bill and his mate. We had no call to be ashamed of the money that stood to our credit in the bank. That we intended to draw out, and take with us in an order or a draft, or something, to Melbourne. Jeanie had her boxes packed, and was so wild with looking forward to seeing St. Kilda beach again that she could hardly sleep or eat as the time drew near.

Friday night came; everything had been settled. It was the last night we should either of us spend at the Turon for many a day—perhaps never. I walked up and down the streets, smoking, and thinking it all over. The idea of bed was ridiculous. How wonderful it all seemed. After what we had gone through and the state we were in less than a year ago, to think that we were within so little of being clear away and safe for ever in another country, with as much as would keep us comfortable for life. I could see Gracey, Aileen, and Jeanie, all so peaceful and loving together, with poor old mother, who had lost her old trick of listening and trembling whenever she heard a strange step or the tread of a horse. What a glorious state of things it would be! A deal of it was owing to the gold. This wonderful gold! But for it we shouldn't have had such a chance in a hundred years. I was that restless I couldn't settle, when I thought, all of a sudden, as I walked up and down,

that I had promised to go and say good-bye to Kate Mullockson, at the Prospectors' Arms, the night before we started. I thought for a moment whether it would be safer to let it alone. I had a strange, unwilling kind of feeling about going there again; but at last, half not knowing what else to do, and half not caring to make an enemy of Kate, if I could help it, I walked up.

It was latish. She was standing near the bar, talking to half-a-dozen people at once, as usual; but I saw she noticed me at once. She quickly drew off a bit from them all; said it was near shutting-up time, and, after a while, passed through the bar into the little parlour where I was sitting down. It was just midnight. The night was half over before I thought of coming in. So when she came in and seated herself near me on the sofa I heard the clock strike 12, and most of the men who were walking about the hall began to clear out.

Somehow, when you've been living at a place for a goodish while, and done well there, and had friends as has stuck by you, as we had at the Turon, you feel sorry to leave it. What you've done you're sure of, no matter how it mayn't suit you in some ways, nor how much better you expect to be off where you are going to. You had that and had the good of it. What the coming time may bring you can't reckon on. All kinds of cross luck and accidents may happen. What's the use of money to a man if he smashes his hip and has to walk with a crutch all his days? I've seen a miner with a thousand a month coming in, but he'd been crushed pretty near to death with a fall of earth, and about half of him was dead. What's a good dinner to a man that his doctor only allows him one slice of meat, a bit of bread, and some toast and water? I've seen chaps like them, and

I'd sooner a deal be the poorest splitter, slogging away with a heavy maul, and able, mind you, to swing it like a man, than one of those broken-down screws. We'd had a good time there, Jim and I. We always had a kind spot in our hearts for Turon and the diggings afterwards. Hard work, high pay, good friends that would stick to a man back and edge, and a safe country to lie in plant in as ever was seen. We was both middlin' sorry, in a manner of speaking, to clear out. Not as Jim said much about it on account of Jeanie; but he thought it all the same.

Well, of course, Kate and I got talkin' and talkin', first about the diggings, and then about other things, till we got to old times in Melbourne, and she began to look miserable and miserabler whenever she spoke about marrying the old man, and wished she'd drowned herself first. She made me take a whisky—a stiffish one that she mixed herself—for a parting glass, and I felt it took a bit of effect upon me. I'd been having my whack during the day. I wasn't no ways drunk; but I must have been touched more or less, because I felt myself to be so sober.

"You're going at last, Dick," says she; "and I suppose we shan't meet again in a hurry. It was something to have a look at you now and then. It reminded me of the happy old times at St. Kilda."

"Oh, come, Kate," I said, "it isn't quite so bad as all that. Besides, we'll be back again in February, as like as not. We're not going for ever."

"Are you telling me the truth, Richard Marston?" says she, standing up and fixing her eyes full on me—fine eyes they were, too, in their way; "or are you trying another deceit, to throw me off the scent and get rid of

me? Why should you ever want to see my face after you leave?"

"A friendly face is always pleasant. Anyhow, Kate, yours is, though you did play me a sharpish trick once, and didn't stick to me like some women might have done."

"Tell me this," she said, leaning forward, and putting one hand on my shoulder, while she seemed to look through the very soul of me—her face grew deadly pale, and her lips trembled, as I'd seen them do once before when she was regular beyond herself—"will you take me with you when you go for good and all? I'm ready to follow you round the world. Don't be afraid of my temper. No woman that ever lived ever did more for the man she loved than I'll do for you. If Jeanie's good to Jim—and you know she is—I'll be twice the woman to you, or I'll die for it. Don't speak!" she went on; "I know I threw you over once. I was mad with rage and shame. You know I had cause, hadn't I, Dick? You know I had. To spite you, I threw away my own life then; now it's a misery and a torment to me every day I live. I can bear it no longer, I tell you. It's killing me—killing me day by day. Only say the word, and I'll join you in Melbourne within the week—to be yours, and yours only, as long as I live."

I didn't think there was that much of the loving nature about her. She used to vex me by being hard and uncertain when we were courting. I knew then she cared about me, and I hadn't a thought about any other woman. Now when I didn't ask her to bother herself about me, and only to let me alone and go her own way, she must turn the tables on me, and want to ruin the pair of us slap over again.

"She'd thrown her arms round my neck and was

sobbing on my shoulder when she finished. I took her over to the sofa, and made her sit down by the side of me.

"Kate," I said, "this won't do. There's neither rhyme nor reason about it. I'm as fond of you as ever I was, but you must know well enough if you make a bolt of it now there'll be no end of a bobbery, and everybody's thoughts will be turned our way. We'll be clean bowled—the lot of us. Jim and I will be jugged. You and Jeanie will be left to the mercy of the world, worse off by a precious sight than ever you were in your lives. Now, if you look at it, what's the good of spoiling the whole jimbang for a fancy notion about me? You and I are safe to be first-rate friends always, but it will be the ruin of both of us if we're fools enough to want to be more. You're living here like a regular queen. You've got a good husband, that's proud of you and gives you everything you can think of. You took him yourself, and you're bound to stick to him. Besides, think of poor Jeanie and Jim. You'll spoil all their happiness; and, more than all—don't make any mistake—you know what Jeanie thinks of a woman who leaves her husband for another man."

If you let a woman have a regular good cry and talk herself out, you can mostly bring her round in the end. So after a bit Kate grew more reasonable. That bit about Jeanie fetched her too. She knew her own sister would turn against her—not harsh like, but she'd never be the same to her again as long as she lived.

The lamp had been put out in the big hall. There was only one in this parlour, and it wasn't over bright. I talked away, and last of all she came round to my way of thinking; at any rate not to want to clear off from the

old man now, but to wait till I came back, or till I wrote to her.

"You are right, Dick," she said at last, "and you show your sense in talking the way you have; though if you loved as I do, you could not do it. But, once more, there's no other woman that you're fonder of than me? It isn't that that makes you so good? Dick Marston good!" and here she laughed bitterly. "If I thought that I should go mad."

What was I to do? I could not tell her that I loved Gracey Storefield ten times as much as I'd ever cheated myself into thinking I cared about her. So I swore that I cared more for her than any woman in the whole world, and always had done so.

This steadied her. We parted good friends, and she promised to keep quiet and try and make the best of things. She turned up the lamp to show me the way out, though the outer door of the hall was left open night and day. It was a way we had at the Turon; no one troubled themselves to be particular about such trifles as furniture and so on. There was very little small robbery there; it was not worth while. All petty stealers were most severely punished into the bargain.

As I stood up to say good-bye a small note dropped out of my breast-pocket. It had shifted somehow. Kate always had an eye like a hawk. With one spring she pounced upon it, and before I could interfere opened and read it! It was Gracey Storefield's. She stood for one moment and glared in my face. I thought she had gone mad. Then she threw the bit of paper down and trampled upon it, over and over again.

"So, Dick Marston," she cried out hoarsely, her very voice changed, "you have tricked me a second time!

Your own Gracey! your own Gracey! and this, by the date, at the very time you were letting me persuade myself, like a fool, like an idiot that I was, that you still care for me! You have put the cap to your villainy now. And, as God made me, you shall have cause—good cause—to fear the woman you have once betrayed and twice scorned. Look to yourself.”

She gazed at me for a moment with a face from which every trace of expression had vanished, except that of the most devilish fury and spite—the face of an evil spirit more than of a woman; and then she walked slowly away. I couldn’t help pitying her, though I cursed my own folly, as I had done a thousand times, that I had ever turned my head or spoken a word to her when first she crossed my path. I got into the street somehow; I hardly knew what to think or to do. That danger was close at our heels I didn’t doubt for a moment. Everything seemed changed in a minute. What was going to happen? Was I the same Dick Marston that had been strolling up Main Street a couple of hours ago? All but off by the to-morrow evening’s coach, and with all the world before me, a good round sum in the bank; best part of a year’s hard, honest work it was the price of, too.

Then all kinds of thoughts came into my head. Would Kate, when her burst of rage was over, go in for revenge in cold blood? She could hardly strike me without at the same time hurting Jeanie through Jim. Should I trust her? Would she come right, kiss, and make friends, and call herself a madwoman—a reckless fool—as she’d often done before? No; she was in bitter earnest this time. It did not pay to be slack in making off. Once we had been caught napping, and once was enough.

The first thing to do was to warn Jim—poor old Jim, snoring away, most like, and dreaming of taking the box-seat for himself and Jeanie at the agent's next morning. It seemed cruel to wake him, but it would have been crueller not to do so.

I walked up the narrow track that led up to the little gully with the moon shining down upon the white quartz rock. The pathway wound through a "blow" of it. I threw a pebble at the door and waited till Jim came out.

"Who's there? Oh! it's you, old man, is it? It's rather late for a call; but if you've come to spend the evening I'll get up, and w'ell have a smoke, anyhow."

"You dress yourself, Jim," I said, "as quick as you can. Put on your hat and come with me; there's something up."

"My God!" says Jim, "what is it? I'm a rank coward now I've got Jeanie. Don't go and tell me we've got to cut and run again."

"Something like it," I said. "If it hasn't come to that yet, it's not far off."

We walked up the gully together. Jim lit his pipe while I told him shortly what had happened to me with Kate.

"May the devil fly away with her!" said Jim, savagely, "for a bad-minded, bad-hearted jade; and then he'd wish he'd left her where she was. She'd be no chop-down there even. I think sometimes she can't be Jeanie's sister at all. They must have changed her, and mothered the wrong child on the old woman. My word! but it's no laughing matter. What's to be done?"

"There's no going away by the coach to-morrow, I'm afraid. She's just the woman to tear straight up the camp and let it all out before her temper cooled. It would take a week to do that. The sergeant or Sir Fer-

dinand knows all about it now. They'll lose no time, you may be certain."

"And must I leave without saying good-night to Jeanie?" says Jim. "No, by ——! If I have half-a-dozen bullets through me, I'll go back and hold her in my arms once more before I'm hunted off and through the country like a wild dog once more. If that infernal Kate has given us away, by George, I could go and kill her with my own hand! The cruel, murdering, selfish brute, I believe she'd poison her mother for a £10-note!"

"No use swearing at Kate, Jim," I said; "that won't mend matters. It's not the first time by a thousand that I've wished I'd never set eyes on her; but if I'd never seen her that day on St. Kilda beach you'd never known Jeanie. So there's evens as well as odds. The thing is, what are we to do now?"

"Dashed if I know. I feel stupid about tackling the bush again; and what can I do with Jeanie? I wish I was dead. I've half a mind to go and shoot that brute of a woman and then myself. But then, poor Jeanie! poor little Jeanie! I can't stand it, Dick; I shall go mad!"

I thought Jim was going to break out crying just as he used when he was a boy. His heart was a big soft one; and though he could face anything in the way of work or fighting that a man dare do, and do two men's share very like, yet his tears, mother said, laid very near his eyes, and till he was a grown man they used to pump up on all sorts of occasions.

"Come, be a man, Jim," I said, "we've got to look the thing in the face; there's no two ways about it. I shall go to Arizona Bill's claim and see what he says. Anyhow I'll leave word with him what to do when we're gone. I'd advise you not to try to see Jeanie; but if you

will you must, I suppose. Good-bye, old man. I shall make my way over to Jonathan's, borrow a horse from him, and make tracks for the Hollow as soon as I can. You'd better leave Jeanie here and do the same."

Jim groaned, but said nothing. He wrung my hands till the bones seemed to crack, and walked away without a word. We knew it was a chance whether we should meet again.

I walked on pretty quick till I came to the flat where Arizona Bill and his mates had their sluicing claim. There were six of them altogether, tall wiry men all of them; they'd mostly been hunters and trappers in the Rocky Mountains before the gold was struck at Suttor's Mill, in the Sacramento Valley. They had been digging in '49 in California, but had come over when they heard from an old mate of a placer diggings at Turon, richer than anything they had ever tried in America.

This camp was half a mile from ours, and there was a bit of broken ground between, so that I thought I was safe in having a word with them before I cleared for Barnes's place, though I took care not to go near our own camp hut. I walked over, and was making straight for the smallest hut, when a rough voice hailed me.

"Hello! stranger, ye came darned near going to h—with your boots on. What did ye want agin that thar cabin?"

I saw then that in my hurry I had gone stumbling against a small hut where they generally put their gold when the party had been washing up and had more than was safe to start from camp with. In this they always put a grizzled old hunter, about whom the yarn was that he never went to sleep, and could shoot anything a mile off. It was thought a very unlikely thing that any gold

he watched would ever go crooked. Most people considered him a deal safer caretaker than the escort.

"Oh! it's you, is it?" drawled Sacramento Joe. "Why, what's doin' at yer old camp?"

"What about?" said I.

"Wal, Bill and I seen three or four half-baked vigilantes that call themselves police; they was a setting round the hut and looked as if they was awaiting for somebody."

"Tell Bill I want him, Joe," I said.

"Can't leave guard nohow," says the true grit old hunter, pointing to his revolver, and dodging up and down with his lame leg, a crooked arm, and a seam in his face like a terrible wound there some time or other. "I darsn't leave guard. You'll find him in that centre tent, with the red flag on it."

I lifted the canvas flap of the door and went in. Bill raised himself in the bed and looked at me quite coolly.

"I was to your location a while since," he said. "Met some friends of yours there too. I didn't cotton to 'em muchly. Something has eventuated. Is that so?"

"Yes. I want your help." I told him shortly all I could tell him in the time.

* * * * *

He listened quietly, and made no remark for a time.

"So ye hev' bin a road agent. You and Jim, that darned innocent old cuss, robbing mails and cattle ranches. It is a real scoop up for me, you bet. I'd heern of bushranging in Australia, but I never reckoned on their bein' men like you and Jim. So the muchacha went back on yer—snakes alive! I kinder expected it. I reckon you're bound to git."

"Yes, Bill, sharp's the word. I want you to draw

my money and Jim's out of the bank; it's all in my name. There's the deposit receipt. I'll back it over to you. You give Jeanie what she wants, and send the rest when I tell you. Will you do that for me, Bill? I've always been on the square with you and your mates."

"You hev', boy, that I'll not deny, and I'll corral the dollars for you. It's an all-fired muss that men like you and Jim should have a black mark agin your record. A spry hunter Jim would have made. I'd laid out to have had him to Arizona yet--and you're a going to dust out right away, you say?"

"I'm off now. Jim's waited too long, I expect. One other thing; let Mr. Haughton, across the creek, have this before daylight."

"What, the Honourable!!! Lawful heart! Wal, I hope ye may strike a better trail yet. Yer young, you and Jim, poor old Jim. Hold on. Hev ye nary shootin' iron?"

"No time," I said. "I haven't been to the camp."

"Go slow, then. Wait here; you'll want suthin, maybe, on the peraira. If ye do, boy! Jim made good shootin' with this, ye mind. Take it and welcome; it'll mind ye of old Arizona Bill."

He handed me a beautifully finished little repeating rifle, hardly heavier than a navy revolver, and a small bag of cartridges.

"Thar, that'll be company for ye, in case ye hev to draw a bead on the--anyone--just temp'ry like. Our horses is hobbled in Bates's clearing. Take my old sorrel if ye can catch him." He stopped for a second and put his hand in a listening fashion. His hunter's ear was quicker than mine. "Thar's a war party on the trail, I reckon. It's a roughish crossing at Slatey Bar," and he

pointed towards the river, which we could plainly hear rushing over a rocky bed. We shook hands, and as I turned down the steep river bank I saw him walk slowly into his tent and close the canvas after him.

The line he pointed to was the one I fixed in my own mind to take long before our talk was over. The Turon, always steep-banked, rocky in places, ran here under an awful high bluff of slate rock. The rushing water in its narrow channel had worn away the rock a good deal, and left ledges or bars under which a deal of gold had been found. Easy enough to cross here on a kind of natural ford. We had many a time walked over on Sundays and holidays for a little kangaroo-shooting now and then. It was here Jim one day, when we were all together for a ramble, surprised the Americans by his shooting with the little Ballard rifle.

As I crossed there was just moon enough to show the deep pools and the hurrying, tearing waters of the wild river, foaming betwixt the big boulders and jags of rock which the bar was strewn with. In front the bank rose 300 feet like the roof of a house, with great overhanging crags of slate rock, and a narrow track in and out between. If I had light enough to find this and get to the top—the country was terribly rough for a few miles, with the darkness coming on—I should be pretty well out of reach by daylight.

I had just struck the track when I heard voices and a horse's tramp on the other side of the river. They seemed not to be sure whether I'd crossed or not, and were tracking up and down on each side of the bar. I breasted the hill track faster than I had done for many a day, and when I got to the top stopped to listen, but could hear nothing. The moon had dropped suddenly;

the forest was as black as pitch. You couldn't see your hand before you.

I knew that I was safe now, if a hundred men were at my heels, till daybreak at any rate. I had the two sides of the gully to guide me. I could manage to make to the farm where the sorrel was at grass with a lot of other diggers' horses. If I could get a saddle and catch the old horse I could put many a mile between me and them before sundown. I stood still when I reached the top of the bluff, partly to get breath and partly to take a last look at old Turon.

Below lay the goldfield clearly marked out by hundreds of camp-fires that were still red and showed bright in the darkened sky. The course of the river was marked by them, in and out, as most of the shallow diggings had followed the river flats. Far back the fires glowed against the black forest, and just before the moon fell I could catch the shine of the water in the deeper reaches of the river.

It was the very picture of what I'd read about an army in camp—lines of tents and a crowd of men all spread out over a bit of land hardly big enough for a flock of sheep. Now and then a dog would bark—now a revolver would go off. It was never quiet on Turon diggings, day or night.

Well, there they all were, tents and diggers, claims and windlasses, pumps and water-wheels. I had been happy enough there, God knows; and perhaps I was looking at it all for the last time. As I turned and made down the hill into the black forest that spread below me like the sea, I felt as if I was leaving everything that was any good in life behind with the Turon lights, and

being hunted once more, in spite of myself, into a desert of darkness and despair.

CHAPTER IV.

I GOT to Bates's paddocks about daylight, and went straight up to the hut where the man lived that looked after it. Most of the diggers that cared about their horses paid for their grass in farmers' and squatters' paddocks, though the price was pretty high. Old Bates, who had a bit of a good grassed flat, made a pretty fair thing out of it by taking in horses at half-a-crown a week apiece. As luck would have it, the man in charge knew me; he'd seen me out with the Yankees one day, and saw I was a friend with them, and when I said I'd come for Bill's sorrel he thought it likely enough, and got out the saddle and bridle. I tipped him well, and went off, telling him I was going to Wattle Flat to look at a quartz-crushing plant that was for sale. I accounted for coming up so early by saying I'd lost my road, and that I wanted to get to Wattle Flat sharp, as another chap wished to buy the plant. I cut across the range, kept the sun on my right hand, and pushed on for Jonathan's. I got there early, and it's well I did. I rode the sorrel hard, but I knew he was pretty tough, and I was able to pay for him if I killed him. I trusted to leaving him at Jonathan's, and getting a fresh horse there. What with the walk over the bluff and the forest, having no sleep the night before, and the bother and trouble of it all, I was pretty well used up. I was real glad to see Jonathan's paddock fence and the old house we'd thought so little of lately. It's wonderful how soon people rise grand notions and begin to get too big for their boots.

"Hello, Dick, what's up?" says Jonathan. "No swag, 'lastic-side boots; flyaway tie, new rifle, old horse; looks a bit fishy, don't it?"

"I can't stop barneying," I said. "Have you a decent horse to give me? The game's up. I must ride night and day till I get home. Heard anything?"

"No; but Billy the Boy's just rode up. I hear him a-talkin' to the gals. He knows if anybody does. I'll take the old moke and put him in the paddock. I can let you have a stunner."

"All right, I'll go in and have some breakfast. It's as much as I dare stop at all now."

"Why, Dick Marston, is that you? No, it can't be," said both girls together. "Why, you look like a ghost. He doesn't; he looks as if he'd been at a ball all night. Plenty of partners, Dick?"

"Never mind, Dick," says Maddie; "go and make yourself comfortable in that room, and I'll have breakfast for you while you'd let a cow out of the bail. We don't forget our friends."

"If all our friends were as true as you, Maddie," I said rather down-like, "I shouldn't be here to-day."

"Oh! that's it, is it?" says she; "we're only indebted to somebody's laying the traps on—a woman of course—for your honour's company. Never mind, old man, I won't hit you when you're down. But, I say, you go and have a yarn with Billy the Boy—he's in the kitchen. I believe the young imp knows something, but he won't let on to Bell and I."

While the steaks were frying—and they smelt very good, bad as I felt—I called out Master Billy and had a talk with him. I handed him a note to begin with. It was money well spent, and, you mark my words, a

shilling spent in grog often buys a man twenty times the worth of it in information, let alone a pound.

Billy had grown a squarish-set, middle-sized chap; his hair wasn't so long, and his clothes were better; his eye was as bright and bold-looking. As he stood tapping one of his boots with his whip, he looked for all the world like a bull-terrier.

"My colonial oath, Dick, you're quite the gentleman—free with your money just the same as ever. You takes after the old governor; he always paid well if you told him the truth. I remember him giving me a hidin' when I was a kiddy for saying something I wasn't sure of. My word! I was that sore for a week after I couldn't button my shirt. But ain't it a pity about Jim?"

"Oh, that's it. What about Jim?"

"Why, the p'leece grabbed him, of course. You fellers don't think you're going on for ever and ever, keepin' the country in a state of terrorism, as the papers say. No, Dick, it's wrong and wicked and sinful. You'll have to knock under and give us young uns a chance."

Here the impudent young rascal looked in my face as bold as brass and burst out laughing. He certainly was the cheekiest young scoundrel I ever came across. But in his own line you couldn't lick him.

"Jim's took," he said, and he looked curiously over at me. "I seen the p'leece a-takin' him across the country to Bargo early this morning. There was poor old Jim a-lookin' as if he was goin' to be hanged, with a chap leading the screw he was on, and Jim's long legs tied underneath. I was gatherin' cattle, I was. I drew some up just for a stall, and had a good look."

"How many men were with him?"

"Only two; and they're to pass through Bargo Brush

about sundown to-night, or a bit earlier. I asked one of the men the road; said I'd lost myself, and would be late home. Ha! ha! ha!"

And how the young villain laughed till the tears came into his eyes, while he danced about like a black-fellow.

"See here, Billy," I said, "here's another pound for you, and there'll be a fiver after if you stick well to me to-day. I won't let Jim be walked off to Berrima without a flutter to save him. It'll be the death of him. He's not like me, and he's got a young wife besides."

"More fool he, Dick. What does a cross cove want with a wife? he can't never expect to do any good with a wife follerin' of him about. I'm agin marrying, leastways as long as a chap's sound on his pins. But I'll stick to you, Dick, and, what's more, I can take you a short cut to the brush, and we can wait in a gully and see the traps come up. You have a snack and lie down for a bit. I seen you were done when you came up. I'll have the horses ready saddled up."

"How about the police? Suppose they come this way."

"Not they. They split and took across towards the Mountain Hut, where you all camped with the horses. I didn't see 'em; but I cut their tracks. Five shod horses. They might be here to-morrow."

A bush telegraph ain't a bad thing. They're not all as good as Billy the Boy. But the worst of 'em, like a bad sheep dog, is a deal better than none.

A bush telegraph, you see, is mostly worked about the neighbourhood he was born in. He's not much good anywhere else. He's like a blackfellow outside of his own "tauri." He's at sea. But within 20 or 30 miles of where he was born and bred he knows every track

every range, every hill, every creek, as well as all the short cuts and by-roads. He can bring you miles shorter than anyone that only follows the road. He can mostly track like a blackfellow, and tell you whether the cattle or horses which he sees the tracks of are belonging to his country or are strangers. He can get you a fresh horse on a pinch, night or day, for he knows everybody's paddocks and yards, as well as the number, looks, pace, and pluck of everybody's riding horses—of many of which he has "taken a turn" out of—that is, ridden them hard and far, and returned them during the night. Of course he can be fined—even imprisoned for this—when he is caught in the act. Herein lies the difficulty. I felt like another man after a wash, a nip, and a real good meal, with the two girls sitting close by, and chattering away as usual.

"Do you know," says Bella, "it half serves you right. Not that that Port Philip woman was right to peach. She ought to have had her tongue torn out first, let alone go open-mouthed at it. But mightn't you have come down here from the Turon on Sundays and holidays now and then, and had a yarn with us all?"

"Of course we ought, and we deserve to be kicked—the lot of us; but there were good reasons why we didn't like to. We were regularly boxed up with the diggers, nobody knew who we were, or where we came from, and only for this Jezebel never would have known. If we'd come here they'd have all dropped that we were old friends, and then they'd have known all about us."

"Well, I'm glad you've lost your characters," says Maddie. "You won't have to be so particular now, and you can come as often as Sir Ferdinand will let you. Good-bye. Billy's waving his hat."

It wasn't long before I was in the saddle and off again. I'd made a bit of a bargain with Jonathan, who sold me a pair of riding boots, butcher's, and a big tweed poncho. The boots were easier to take a long rough ride in than trousers, and I wanted the poncho to keep the Ballard rifle under. It wouldn't do to have it in your hand all the time.

As we rode along I settled upon the way I'd try and set poor Jim free. Bad off as I was myself I couldn't bear to see him chained up, and knew that he was going for years and years to a place more wicked and miserable than he'd ever heard of.

After riding twenty miles the sun was getting low, when Billy pointed to a trail which came broad ways across the road, and which then followed it.

"Here they are—p'leece, and no mistake. Here's their horses' tracks right enough. Here's the prisoner's horse, see how he stumbled? and this road they're bound to go till they cross the Stony point, and get into Bargo Brush, near a creek."

We had plenty of time by crossing a range and running a blind creek down to be near the place where the troopers must pass as they crossed the main creek. We tied up the horses a hundred yards distance behind us in the forest, and I made ready to rescue Jim, if it could be managed anyhow.

How was it to be done? I could depend on the rifle carrying true at short ranges; but I didn't like the notion of firing at a man behind his back, like. I hardly knew what to do, when all of a sudden two policemen showed up at the end of the track nearest the creek.

One man was a bit in front—riding a fine horse, too. The next one had a led horse, on which rode poor old

Jim, looking as if he was going to be hanged that day, as Billy said, though I knew well he wasn't thinking about himself. I don't believe Jim ever looked miserable for so long since he was born. Whatever happened to him before, he'd have a cry or a fight, and it would be over. But now his poor old face looked that wretched and miserable, as if he'd never smile again as long as he lived. He didn't seem to care where they took him; and when the old horse stumbled and close upon fell down he didn't take notice.

When I saw that, my mind was made up. I couldn't let them take him away to his death. I could see he wouldn't live a month. He'd go fretting his life about Jeanie, and after the free life he'd always led he'd fall sick like the blacks when they're shut up, and die without any reason but because a wild bird won't live in a cage.

So I took aim and waited till they were just crossing the creek into the forest. The leading man was just riding up the bank, and the one that led Jim's horse was on the bit of a sand bed that the water had brought down. He was the least bit ahead of Jim, when I pulled trigger, and sent a ball into him, just under the collar-bone. I fired high on purpose. He drops off his saddle like a dead man. The next minute Billy the Boy raises the most awful corroboree of screams and howls, enough for a whole gang of bushrangers, if they went in for that sort of thing. He emptied four chambers of his revolver at the leading trooper right away, and I fired at his horse. The constable never doubted—the attack was so sudden and savage like—but there was a party of men hid in the brush. Billy's shots had whistled round him, and mine had nearly dropped his horse, so he thought

it no shame to make a bolt and leave his mate, as seemed very bad hit, in our hands.

His horse's hand-gallop grewed fainter and fainter in the distance, and then we unbound poor Jim, set his feet at liberty, and managed to dispose of the handcuffs. Jim's face began to look more cheerful, but he was down in the mouth again when he saw the wounded man. He began at once to do all he could for him. We stopped a short distance behind the brush, which had already helped us well.

Jim propped up the poor chap, whose life-blood was flowing red through the bullet-hole, and made him as comfortable as he could. "I must take your horse, mate," he says; "but you know it's only the fortune of war. A man must look after himself. Some one'll come along the road soon." He mounted the trooper's horse, and we slipped through the trees—it was getting dark now—till we came to our horses. Then we all rode off together. We took Billy the Boy with us until he put us on to a road that led us into the country that we knew. We could make our own way from there, and so we sent off our scout, telling him to ride to the nearest township and say he'd seen a trooper lying badly wounded by the Bargo brush roadside. The sooner he was seen to, the better chance he'd have.

Jim brightened up considerably after this. He told me how he'd gone back to say good-bye to Jeanie—how the poor girl went into fits, and he couldn't leave her. By the time she got better the cottage was surrounded by police; there was no use being shot down without a chance, so he gave himself up.

"My word, Dick," he said, "I wished for a bare-backed horse, and a deep gully, then; but it wasn't to be.

There was no horse handy, and I'd only have been carried into my own place a dead man and frightened the life out of poor Jeanie as well."

"You're worth a dozen dead men yet, Jim," I said. "Keep up your pecker, old man. We'll get across to the Hollow some time within the next twenty-four hours, and there we'll be safe anyhow. They can't touch Jeanie, you know; and you're not short of what cash she'll want to keep her till this blows over a bit."

"And what am I to do all the time?" he says, so pitiful like. "We're that fond of one another, Dick, that I couldn't hardly bear her out of my sight, and now I'll be months and months without a look at her pretty face, where I've never seen anything yet but love and kindness. Too good for me she always was; and what have I brought her to? My God! Dick, I wish you'd shot me instead of the constable, poor devil!"

"Well, you wasn't very far apart," I says, chaffing like. "If that old horse they put you on had bobbed forward level with him you'd have got plugged instead. But it's no use giving in, Jim. We must stand up to our fight now, or throw up the sponge. There's no two ways about it."

We rattled on then without speaking, and never cried crack till we got to Nulla Mountain, where we knew we were pretty safe not to be followed up. We took it easier then, and stopped to eat a bit of bread and meat the girls had put up for me at Jonathan's. I'd never thought of it before. When I took the parcel out of the pocket of my poncho I thought it felt deuced heavy, and there, sure enough, was one of those shilling flasks of brandy they sell for chaps to go on the road with.

Brandy ain't a good thing at all times and seasons,

and I've seen more than one man, or a dozen either, that might just as well have sawed away at their throats with a blunt knife as put the first glass to their lips. But we was both hungry, thirsty, tired, miserable, and pretty well done and beaten, though we hadn't had time to think about it. That drop of brandy seemed as if it had saved our lives. I never forgot it, nor poor Maddie Barnes for thinking of it for me. And I did live to do her a good turn back—much as there's been said again me, and true enough, too.

It was a long way into the night, and not far from daylight either, when we stumbled up to the cave—dead beat, horses and men both. We'd two minds to camp on the mountain, but might have been followed up, hard as we'd ridden, and we didn't like to throw a chance away. We didn't want the old man to laugh at us, and we didn't want to do any more time in Berrima—not now, anyhow. We'd been living too gay and free a life to begin with the jug all over again.

So we thought we'd make one job of it, and get right through, if we had to sleep for a week after it. It would be slow enough, but anything was better than what we'd gone through lately.

After we'd got down the mountain and on the flat land of the valley it rested our feet a bit, that was pretty nigh cut to pieces with the rocks. Our horses were that done we dursn't ride 'em for hours before. As we came close, out walks old Crib, and smells at us. He knew us in a minute, and jumped up and began to try and lick Jim's hand: the old story. He just gave one sort of sniff at me, as much as to say, "Oh! it's you, is it?" Then he actually gave a kind of half-bark. I don't believe he'd barked for years, such a queer noise it was.

Anyhow, it woke up dad, and he came out pretty sharp with a revolver in his hand. As soon as he saw the old dog walking alongside of us he knew it was right, and begins to feel for his pipe. First thing father always did as soon as any work or fighting or talking was over was to get out his pipe and light it. He didn't seem the same man without it.

"So you've found your way back again, have ye?" he says. "Why, I thought you was all on your way to Californy by this time. Ain't this Christmas week? Why, I was expecting to come over to Ameriky myself one of these days, when all the derry was over— Why, what's up with the boy?"

Jim was standing by, sayin' nothing, while I was taking off the saddles and bridles and letting the horses go, when all of a sudden he gives a lurch forward, and if the old man hadn't laid hold of him in his strong arms and propped him up he'd have gone down face foremost like a girl in a dead faint.

"What's up with him, Dick?" says father, rather quick, almost as if he was fond of him, and had some natural feeling—sometimes I raly think he had—"been any shooting?"

"Yes; not at him, though. Tell you all about it in the morning. He's eaten nothing, and we've been travelling best part of twenty-four hours right off the reel."

"Hold him up while I fetch out the pannikin. There's plenty of grub inside. He'll be all right after a sleep."

A drop of rum and water brought him to, and after that we made ourselves a cup of tea and turned in. The sun was pretty high when I woke. When I looked out there was the old man sitting on the log by the fire, smoking. What was a deal more curious I saw the half-

caste, Warrigal, coming up from the flat, leading a horse and carrying a pair of hobbles. Something made me look over to a particular corner where Starlight always slept when he was at the Hollow. Sure enough there was the figure of a man rolled up in a cloak. I knew by the way his boots and things were thrown about that it could be no other than Starlight.

CHAPTER V.

I'D settled in my mind that it couldn't be anyone else, when he sat up, yawned, and looked round as if he had not been away from the old place a week.

"Ha! Richard, here we are again! 'Feeds the boar in the old frank?' The governor told me you and Jim had made back. Dreadful bore, isn't it? Just when we'd all rubbed off the rust of our bush life and were getting civilized. I feel very seriously ill-treated, I assure you. I have a great mind to apply to the Government for compensation. That's the worst of these new inspectors, they are so infernally zealous."

"You were too many for them, it seems. I half thought you might have been nailed. How the deuce did you get the office in time?"

"The faithful Warrigal, as usual, gave me timely warning, and brought a horse, of course. He will appear on the Judgment Day leading Rainbow, I firmly believe. Why he should be so confoundedly anxious about my welfare I can't make out—I can't, really. It's his peculiar form of mania, I suppose. We all suffer from some madness or other."

"How the blazes did he know the police were laid on to the lot of us?" I said.

"I didn't know myself that your Kate had come the double on you. I might have known she would, though. Well, it seems Warrigal took it into his semi-barbaric head to ride into Turon and loaf about, partly to see me, and partly about another matter that your father laid him on about. He was standing about near the Prospectors' Arms, late on Friday night, doing nothing and seeing everything, as usual, when he noticed Mrs. Mullockson run out of the house like a Bedlamite. 'My word, that missis big one coolah!' was his expression, and made straight for the camp. Now Warrigal had seen you come out just before. He doesn't like you and Jim over much—bad taste, I tell him, on his part—but I suppose he looks upon you as belonging to the family. So he stalked the fair and furious Kate."

"That was how it was, then?"

"Yes, much in that way. I must say, Dick, that if you are so extremely fond of—well—studying the female character, you should carry on the pursuit more discreetly. Just see what this miscalculation has cost your friends!"

"Confound her! She's a heartless wretch, and I hope she'll die in a ditch."

"Exactly. Well, she knocked, and a constable opened the outer door.

"'I want to see Sir Ferdinand,' she says.

"'He's in bed and can't be disturbed,' says the bobby. 'Any message I can deliver?'

"'I have important information,' says she. 'Rouse him up, or you'll be sorry for it.'

"'Won't it do to-morrow morning?' says he.

“‘No, it won’t,’ says she, stamping her foot. ‘Do what I tell you, and don’t stand there like a fool.’

“She waited a bit. Then, Warrigal says, out came Sir Ferdinand, very polite. ‘What can I do for you,’ says he, ‘Mrs. Mullockson?’

“‘Should you like to know where the Marstons are, Sir Ferdinand?’ says she, ‘Dick and Jim.’

“‘Know? Would I not?’ says he. ‘No end of warrants out for them; since that Ballabri Bank robbery they seem to have disappeared under ground. Dick’s dead, they think. Hard hit when Watson fired at him, near home. And that fellow Starlight, too! Most remarkable man of his day. I’d give my eyes to put the bracelets upon him.’

“She whispered something into his ear.

“‘Guard, turn out,’ he roars out first; then, dropping his voice, says out, ‘My dear Mrs. Mullockson’ (you should hear Warrigal imitate him), ‘you have made my fortune—officially, I mean, of course. I shall never forget your kindness. Thanks, a thousand times.’

“‘Don’t thank me,’ she says, and she burst out crying, and goes slowly back to the hotel.

“Warrigal had heard quite enough. He rips over to Daly’s mob, borrows a horse, saddle, and bridle, and leads him straight down to our camp. He roused me up about one o’clock, and I could hardly make any explanation to my mates. Such stunning good fellows they were, too! I wonder whether I shall ever associate with gentlemen again? The chances are against it.

“I had all kinds of trouble to tell them I was going away with Warrigal, and yet not to tell too much.

“‘What the dickens,’ says Clifford, ‘can you want, going away with this familiar of yours at this hour of the

night? You're like the fellow in Scott's novel ("Anne of Geierstein") that I was reading over again yesterday—the mysterious stranger that's called for at midnight by the Avenger of Blood, departs with him and is never seen more.'

"'In case you never see me afterwards,' I said, 'we'd better say good-bye. We've been good mates and true friends, haven't we?'

"'Never better,' he said. 'I don't know what we shall do without you. But, of course, you're not going very far?'

"'Good-bye, in case,' I said. 'Anyhow, I'll write you a line, and as I shook hands with them—two regular trumps, if ever there were any in the world—I had a kind of notion I'd never see them again. Hardly think I shall, either. Sir Ferdinand surrounded the hut about an hour later, and made them come out one by one—both of them and the wages man. I dare say they were surprised.

"'Where's the fourth man, Clifford?' says Sir Ferdinand. 'Just ask him to come out, will you?'

"'What, Frank Haughton?' says he.

"I heard most of this from that young devil Billy the Boy. He saw Sir Ferdinand ride up, so he hid close by, just for the fun of hearing how he got on. He'd seen Warrigal and me ride away.

"'Frank Devil!' bangs out Sir Ferdinand, who'd begun to get his monkey up. 'How should I know his infernal purser's name? No man, it seems to me, has his right name on this confounded goldfield. I mean Starlight—Starlight the cattle stealer, the mail robber, the bushranger, whose name is notorious over the three

colonies, and New Zealand to boot—your intimate friend and partner for the last nine months!’

“‘You perfectly amaze me,’ says Clifford. ‘But can’t you be mistaken? Is your information to be depended upon?’”

“‘Mine came from a jealous woman,’ says Sir Ferdinand. ‘They may generally be depended upon for a straight tip. But we’re losing time. When did he leave the claim, and which way did he go?’

“‘I have no idea which way he went,’ says Clifford. ‘He did not say, but he left about an hour since.’

“‘On foot or on horseback?’

“‘On horseback.’

“‘Anyone with him?’

“‘Yes, another horseman.’

“‘What was he like?’

“‘Slight, dark man, youngish, good-looking.’

“‘Warrigal the half-caste! By George! warrants out for him also,’ says Sir Ferdinand. ‘On a good horse, of course, with an hour’s start. We may give up the idea of catching him this time. Follow him up as a matter of form. Good-bye, Clifford. You’ll hear news of your friend before long, or I’m much mistaken.’

“‘Stop, Sir Ferdinand, you must pardon me; but I don’t exactly understand your tone. The man that we knew by the name of Frank Haughton may be, as you say, an escaped criminal. All I know is that he lived with us since we came here, and that no fellow could have behaved more truly like a man and a gentleman. As far as we are concerned, I have a material guarantee that he has been scrupulously honest. Do you mean to hint for one moment that we were aware of his previous history, or in any way mixed up with his acts?’

“‘If I do, what then?’ says Sir Ferdinand, laughing.

“‘The affair is in no way ludicrous,’ says Clifford, very stiff and dignified. ‘I hold myself to have received an insult, and must ask you to refer me to a friend.’

“‘Do you know that I could arrest you and Hastings now and lock you up on suspicion of being concerned with him in the Ballabri Bank robbery?’ says Sir Ferdinand, in a stern voice. ‘Don’t look so indignant. I only say I could. I am not going to do so, of course. As to fighting you, my dear fellow, I am perfectly at your service at all times and seasons whenever I resign my appointment as Inspector of Police for the colony of New South Wales. The Civil Service regulations do not permit of duelling at present, and I found it so deuced hard to work up to the billet that I am not going to imperil my continuance therein. After all, I had no intention of hurting your feelings, and apologize if I did. As for that rascal Starlight, he would deceive the very devil himself.’

“And so Sir Ferdinand rode off.”

“How did you come; by Jonathan’s?”

“We called nowhere. Warrigal, as usual, made a short cut of his own across the bush—scrubs, gullies, mountains, all manner of desert paths. We made the Hollow yesterday afternoon, and went to sleep in a nook known to us of old. We dropped into breakfast here at daylight, and I felt sleepy enough for another snooze.”

“We’re all here again, it seems,” I said, sour enough. “I suppose we’ll have to go on the old lay; they won’t let us alone when we’re doing fair work and behaving ourselves like men. They must take the consequences, d— them!”

“Ha! very true,” says Starlight in his dreamy kind of

way. "Most true, Richard. Society should make a truce occasionally, or proclaim an amnesty with offenders of our stamp. It would pay better than driving us to desperation. How is Jim? He's worse off than either of us, poor fellow."

"Jim's very bad. He can't get over being away from Jeanie. I never saw him so down in the mouth this years."

"Poor old Jim, he's a deal too good for the place. Sad mistake this getting married. People should either keep straight or have no relatives to bear the brunt of their villainies. 'But, soft,' as they say in the play, 'where am I?' I thought I was a virtuous miner again. Here we are at this devil-discovered, demon-haunted old Hollow again—first cousin to the pit of Acheron. There's no help for it, Dick. We must play our parts gallantly, as demons of this lower world, or get hissed off the stage."

* * * * *

We didn't do much for a few days, you may be sure. There was nothing to do, for one thing; and we hadn't made up our mind what our line was to be. One thing was certain: there would be more row made about us than ever. We should have all the police in the country worried and barked at by the Press, the people, the Government, and their superior officers till they got something to show about us. Living at the diggings under the nose of the police, without their having the least suspicion who we were, was bad enough; but the rescue of Jim and the shooting of a policeman in charge of him was more serious—the worst thing that had happened yet.

There would be the devil to pay if they couldn't find a track of us. No doubt money would be spent like water in bribing anyone who might give information about

us. Everyone would be tried that we had ever been known to be friendly with. A special body of men could be told off to make a dart to any spot they might get wind of near where we had been last seen.

We had long talks and barneys over the whole thing—sometimes by ourselves with Starlight, sometimes with father. A long time it was before we settled upon any regular put-up bit of work to do.

Sooner or later we began to see the secret of the Hollow would be found out. There was no great chance in the old times with only a few shepherds and stock-riders wandering through the bush, once in a way straggling over the country. But now the whole colony swarmed with miners, who were always prospecting, as they called it—that is, looking out for fresh patches of gold. Now, small parties of these men—bold, hardy, experienced chaps—would take a pick and shovel, a bucket, and a tin dish, with a few weeks' rations, and scour the whole country side. They would try every creek, gully, hill-side, and river bed. If they found the colour of gold, the least trace of it in a dish of wash-dirt, they would at once settle down themselves. If it went rich the news would soon spread, and a thousand men might be gathered in one spot—the bank of a small creek, the side of a steep range—within a fortnight, with ten thousand more sure to follow within a month.

That might happen at any time on one of the spurs of Nulla Mountain; and the finding out of the track down to the Hollow by some one of the dozens of rambling, shooting, fishing diggers would be as certain to happen as the sun to rise.

Well, the country had changed, and we were bound to change with it. We couldn't stop boxed up in the

Hollow day after day, and month after month, shooting and horse-breaking, doing nothing and earning nothing.

If we went outside there were ten times more men looking out for us than ever, ten times more chance of our being tracked or run down than ever. That we knew from the newspapers. How did we see them? Oh, the old way. We sent out our scout, Warrigal, and he got our letters and papers too, from a "sure hand," as Starlight said the old people in the English wars used to say.

The papers were something to see. First he brought us in a handbill that was posted in Bargo, like this:—

"FIVE HUNDRED POUNDS REWARD.

"The above reward will be paid to anyone giving information as to the whereabouts of Richard Marston, James Marston, and a man whose name is unknown, but who can be identified chiefly by the appellation of Starlight."

"Pleasing way of drawing attention to a gentleman's private residence," says Starlight, smiling first and looking rather grim afterwards. "Never mind, boys, they'll increase that reward yet, by Jove! It will have to be a thousand a-piece if they don't look a little sharper."

We laughed, and dad growled out—

"Don't seem to have the pluck, any on ye, to tackle a big touch again. I expect they'll send a summons for us next, and get old Bill Barkis, the bailiff at Bargo, to serve it."

"Come, come, governor," says Starlight, "none of that. We've got quite enough devil in us yet, without your stirring him up. You must give us time, you know. Let's see what this paper says. *Turon Star!* What a god-send to it!

“‘BUSHRANGERS!

“‘STARLIGHT AND THE MARSTONS AGAIN.

“‘The announcement will strike our readers, if not with the most profound astonishment, certainly with considerable surprise, that these celebrated desperadoes, for whose apprehension such large sums have been offered, for whom the police in all the colonies have made such unremitting search, should have been discovered in our midst. Yet such is the case. On this very morning, from information received, our respected and efficient Inspector of Police, Sir Ferdinand Morringer, proceeded soon after midnight to the camp of Messrs. Clifford and Hastings. He had every reason to believe that he would have had no difficulty in arresting the famous Starlight, who, under the cognomen of the Honourable Frank Haughton, has been for months a partner in this claim. The shareholders were popularly known as “the three Honourables,” it being rumoured that both Mr. Clifford and Mr. Hastings were entitled to that prefix, if not to a more exalted one.

“‘With characteristic celerity, however, the famous outlaw had shortly before quitted the place, having received warning and been provided with a fast horse by his singular retainer, Warrigal, a half-caste native of the colony, who is said to be devotedly attached to him, and who has been seen from time to time on the Turon.

“‘Of the Marston brothers, the elder one, Richard, would seem to have been similarly apprised, but James Marston was arrested in his cottage in Specimen Gully. Having been lately married, he was apparently unwilling to leave his home, and lingered too long for prudence.

“‘While rejoicing, as must all good citizens, at the

discovery of evil-doers and the capture of one member of a band of notorious criminals, we must state in fairness and candour that their conduct has been, while on the field as miners, free from reproach in every way. For James Marston, who was married but a short while since to a Melbourne young lady of high personal attractions and the most winning amiability, great sympathy has been expressed by all classes.'

"So much for the *Star*. Everybody is sorry for you, old man," he says to Jim. "I shouldn't wonder if they'd make you a beak if you'd stayed there long enough. I'm afraid Dick's dropping the policeman won't add to our popularity, though."

"He's all right," I said. "Hurrah! look here. I'm glad I didn't finish the poor beggar. Listen to this, from the *Turon Banner*:—

"'BUSHRANGING REVIVED.

"'The good old days have apparently not passed away for ever, when mail robberies and hand-to-hand conflicts with armed robbers were matters of weekly occurrence. The comparative lull observable in such exciting occurrences of late has been proved to be but the ominous hush of the elements that precedes the tempest. Within the last few days the mining community has been startled by the discovery of the notorious gang of bush-rangers, Starlight and the Marstons, domiciled in the very heart of the diggings, attired as ordinary miners, and—for their own purposes possibly—leading the laborious lives proper to the avocation. They have been fairly successful, and as miners, it is said, have shown themselves to be manly and fair-dealing men. We are not among those who care to judge their fellow-men

harshly. It may be that they had resolved to forsake the criminal practices which had rendered them so unhappily celebrated. James Marston had recently married a young person of most respectable family and prepossessing appearance. As far as may be inferred from this step and his subsequent conduct, he had cut loose from his former habits. He, with his brother, Richard Marston, worked an adjoining claim to the Arizona Sluicing Company, with the respected shareholders of which they were on terms of intimacy. The well-known Starlight, as Mr. Frank Haughton, became partner and tent-mate with the Hon. Mr. Clifford and Mr. Hastings, an aristocratic society in which the manners and bearing of this extraordinary man permitted him to mingle without suspicion of detection.

“‘Suddenly information was furnished to the police respecting all three men. We are not at present aware of the source from which the clue was obtained. Suffice it to say that Sir Ferdinand Morringer promptly arranged for the simultaneous action of three parties of police with the hope of capturing all three outlaws. But in two cases the birds were flown. Starlight’s *âme damnée*, a half-caste named Warrigal, had been observed on the field the day before. By him he was doubtless furnished with a warning, and the horse upon which he left his abode shortly before the arrival of Sir Ferdinand. The elder Marston had also eluded the police. But James Marston, hindered possibly by domestic ties, was captured at his cottage at Specimen Gully. For him sympathy has been universally expressed. He is regarded rather as a victim than as an active agent in the many criminal offences chargeable to the account of Starlight’s gang.

“‘Since writing the above we have been informed that trooper Walsh, who with another constable was escorting James Marston to Bargo gaol, has been brought in badly wounded. The other trooper reports that he was shot down and the party attacked by persons concealed in the thick timber near Wild Horse Creek, at the edge of Bargo Brush. In the confusion that ensued the prisoner escaped. It was at first thought that Walsh was fatally injured, but our latest report gives good hope of his recovery.

“‘We shall be agreeably surprised if this be the end and not the commencement of a series of darker tragedies.’”

CHAPTER VI.

A MONTH'S loafing in the Hollow. Nothing doing and nothing to think of except what was miserable enough, God knows. Then things began to shape themselves, in a manner of speaking. We didn't talk much together; but each man could see plain enough what the others was thinking of. Dad growled out a word now and then, and Warrigal would look at us from time to time with a flash in his hawk's eyes that we'd seen once or twice before and knew the meaning of. As for Jim, we were bound to do something or other, if it was only to keep him from going melancholy mad. I never seen any man changed more from what he used to be than Jim did. He that was the most careless, happy-go-lucky chap that ever stepped, always in a good temper and full of his larks. At the end of the hottest day in summer on the plains, with no water handy, or the middle of the coldest winter night in an ironbark forest, and we sitting on our

horses waiting for daylight, with the rain pouring down our backs, not game to light a fire, and our hands that cold we could hardly hold the reins, it was all one to Jim. Always jolly, always ready to make little of it all. Always ready to laugh or chaff or go on with monkey tricks like a boy. Now it was all the other way with him. He'd sit grizzling and smoking by himself all day long. No getting a word out of him. The only time he seemed to brighten up was once when he got a letter from Jeanie. He took it away into the bush and stayed hours and hours.

From never thinking about anything or caring what came uppermost, he seemed to have changed all on the other tack and do nothing but think. I'd seen a chap in Berrima something like him for a month or two; one day he manned the barber's razor and cut his throat. I began to be afraid Jim would go off his head and blow his brains out with his own revolver. Starlight himself got to be cranky and restless-like too. One night he broke out as we were standing smoking under a tree, a mile or so from the cave—

“By all the devils, Dick, I can't stand this sort of thing much longer. We shall go mad or drink ourselves to death”—(we'd all been pretty well “on” the night before)—“if we stick here till we're trapped or smoked out like a 'guana out of a tree spout. We must make a rise somehow, and try for blue water again. I've been fighting against the notion the whole time we've been here, but the devil and your old dad (who's a near relative, I believe) have been too strong for us. Of course, you know what it's bound to be?”

“I suppose so. I know when dad was away last week he saw that beggar and some of his mates. They

partly made it up awhile back, but didn't fancy doing it altogether by themselves. They've been waiting on the chance of our standing in and your taking command."

"Of course, the old story," he says, throwing his cigar away, and giving a half laugh—such a laugh it was, too. "Captain Starlight again, I suppose. The paltry vanity of leadership, and of being in the front of my fellow men, has been the ruin of me ever since I could recollect. If my people had let me go into the army, as I begged and prayed of them to do, it might have been all the other way. I recollect that day and hour when my old governor refused my boyish petition, laughed at me—sneered at me. I took the wrong road then. I swear to you, Dick, I never had thought of evil till that cursed day which made me reckless and indifferent to everything. And this is the end—a wasted life, a felon's doom! Quite melodramatic, isn't it, Richard? Well, we'll play out the last act with spirit. 'Enter first robber,' and so on. Good-night."

He walked away. I never heard him say so much about himself before. It set me thinking of what luck and chance there seemed to be in this world. How men were not let do what they knew was best for 'em—often and often—but something seemed to drive 'em further and further along the wrong road, like a lot of stray wild cattle that wants to make back to their own run, and a dog here, a fence the other way. A man on foot or a flock of sheep always keeps frightening 'em further and further from the old beat till they get back into a bit of back country or mallee scrub and stop there for good. Cattle and horses and men and women are awful like one another in their ways, and the more you watch 'em the more it strikes you.

Another day or two idling and card-playing, another headache after too much grog at night, brought us to a regular go in about business, and then we fixed it for good.

We were to stick up the next monthly gold escort. That was all. We knew it would be a heavy one and trusted to our luck to get clear off with the gold, and then take a ship for Honolulu or San Francisco. A desperate chance; but we were desperate men. We had tried to work hard and honest. We had done so for best part of a year. No one could say we had taken the value of a halfpenny from any man. And yet we were not let stay right when we asked for nothing but to be let alone and live out the rest of our lives like men.

They wouldn't have us that way, and now they must take us across the grain, and see what they would gain by that. So it happened we went out one day with Warrigal to show us the way, and after riding for hours and hours, we came to a thick scrub. We rode through it till we came to an old cattle track. We followed that till we came to a tumble-down slab hut with a stock-yard beside it. The yard had been mended, and the rails were up. Seven or eight horses were inside, all in good condition. As many men were sitting or standing about smoking outside the old hut.

When we rode up they all came forward and we had it out. We knew who was coming, and were ready for 'em. There was Moran, of course, quiet and savage-looking, just as like a black snake as ever twisting about with his deadly glittering eyes, wanting to bite someone. There was Daly and Burke, Wall and Hulbert, and two or three more—I won't say who they were now—and if you please who should come out of the hut last but

Master Billy the Boy, as impudent as you like, with a pipe in his mouth, and a revolver in his belt, trying to copy Moran and Daly. I felt sorry when I see him, and thought what he'd gradually come to bit by bit, and where he'd most likely end, all along of the first money he had from father for telegraphing. But after all I've a notion that men and women grow up as they are intended to from the beginning. All the same as a tree from seed. You may twist it this road or that, make it a bit bigger or smaller according to the soil or the way it's pruned and cut down when it's young, but you won't alter the nature of that tree or the fruit that it bears. You won't turn a five-corner into a quince, or a geebung into an orange, twist and twine, and dig and water as you like. So whichever way Billy the Boy had been broken and named he'd have bolted and run off the course. Take a pet dingo now. He might look very tame, and follow them that feed him, and stand the chain; but as soon as anything passed close that he could kill, he'd have his teeth into it and be lapping its blood before you could say knife, and the older he got the worse he'd be.

"Well, Dick," says this young limb of Satan, "so you've took to the Queen's highway agin, as the chap says in the play. I thought you and Jim was a-goin' to jine the Methodies or the Sons of Temperance at Turon, you both got to look so thunderin' square on it. Poor old Jim looks dreadful down in the mouth, don't he, though?"

"It would be all the better for you if you'd joined some other body, you young scamp," I said. "Who told you to come here? I've half a mind to belt you home again to your mother;" and I walked towards him.

"No, you won't, Dick Marston, don't you make any

mistake," says the young bull-pup, looking nasty. "I'm as good a man as you, with this little tool." Here he pulled out his revolver. "I've as much right to turn out as you have. What odds is it to you what I do?"

I looked rather foolish at this, and Moran and Burke began to laugh.

"You'd better set up a night-school, Dick," says Burke, "and get Billy and some of the other flash kiddies to come. They might turn over a new leaf in time."

"If you'll stand up, or Moran there, that's grinning behind you, I'll make some of ye laugh on the wrong side," I said.

"Come on," drawls Moran, taking off his coat, and walking up; "I'd like to have a smack at you before you go into the Church."

We should have been at it hammer and tongs—we both hated one another like poison—only the others interfered, and Billy said we ought to be ashamed of ourselves for quarrelling like schoolboys. We were nice sort of chaps to stick-up a gold escort. That made a laugh, and we knocked off.

Well, it looked as if no one wanted to speak. Then Hulbert, a very quiet chap, says, "I believe Ben Marston's the oldest man here; let's hear what he's got to say."

Father gets up at once, and looks steady at the rest of 'em, takes his pipe out of his mouth, and shakes the baccy out. Then he says —

"All on ye knows without my telling what we've come here about, and what there's hangin' to it. It's good enough if it's done to rights; but make no mistake, boys, it's a battle as must be fought game, and right back to the ropes, or not at all. If there's a bird here

that won't stand the steel he'd better be put in a bag and took home again."

"Never mind about the steel, daddy," says one of the new men. "We're all good for a flutter when the wager's good. What'll it be worth a man, and where are we going to divide? We know your mob's got some crib up in the mountains that no one knows about. We don't want the swag took there and planted. It mightn't be found easy."

"Did ever a one of ye heer tell o' me actin' crooked?" says father. "Look here, Bill, I'm not as young as I was, but you stand up to me for three rounds and I'll take some of the cheek out of yer."

Bill laughed.

"No fear, daddy, I'd sooner face Dick or Jim. But I only want what's fair between man and man. It's a big touch, you know, and we can't take it to the bank to divide, like diggers, or summons yer either."

"What's the good of growlin' and snappin'?" says Burke. "We're all goin' in regular, I suppose, share and share alike?" The men nodded. "Well, there's only one way to make things shipshape, and that's to have a captain. We'll pick one of ourselves, and whatever he says we'll bind ourselves to do—life or death. Is that it, boys?"

"Yes, yes, that's the only way," came from all hands.

"Now, the next thing to work is who we're to make captain of. There's one here as we can all depend on, who knows more about road-work than all the rest of us put together. You know who I mean; but I don't want ye to choose him or any man because I tell you. I propose Starlight for captain if he'll take it, and them that don't believe me let 'em find a better man if they can."

"I vote for Dan Moran," says another man, a youngish farmer-looking chap. "He's a bushman, like ourselves, and not a half-bred swell, that's just as likely to clear out when we want him most as do anything else."

"You go back to the Springs and feed them pigs, Johnny," says father, walking towards the young chap. "That's about what *you're* bred for; nobody'll take you for a swell, quarter-bred, or anything else. Howsoever, let's draw lots for it. Every man put his fancy down on a bit of paper, and put 'em into my old hat here."

This was done after a bit, and the end of it was ten votes for Starlight and two or three for Moran, who looked savage and sulkier than ever.

When this was over Starlight walked over from where he was standing, near me and Jim, and faced the crowd. He drew himself up a bit, and looked round as haughty as he used to do when he walked up the big room at the Prospectors' Arms in Turon—as if all the rest of us was dirt under his feet.

"Well, my lads," he said, "you've done me the great honour to elect me to be your captain. I'm willing to act, or I shouldn't be here. If you're fools enough to risk your lives and liberties for a thousand ounces of gold a man, I'm fool enough to show you the way."

"Hurrah!" said half-a-dozen of them, flinging up their hats. "We're on, Captain. Starlight for ever! You ride ahead and we'll back up."

"That will do," he says, holding up his hand as if to stop a lot of dogs barking; "but listen to me." Here he spoke a few words in that other voice of his that always sounded to me and Jim as if it was a different man talking, or the devil in his likeness. "Now mind this before we go; you don't quite know me; you will

by-and-bye, perhaps. When I take command of this gang, for this bit of work or any other, my word's law—do you hear? And if any man disputes it or disobeys my orders, by——, I'll shoot him like a dog."

As he stood there looking down on the lot of 'em, as if he was their king, with his eyes burning up at last with that slow fire that lay at the bottom of 'em, and only showed out sometimes, I couldn't help thinking of a pirate crew that I'd read of when I was a boy, and the way the pirate captain ruled 'em.

CHAPTER VII.

THERE was no cheering after this, most of 'em sat down on their heels—native fashion—and began to take out their pipes as if the play was over, and yarn away among themselves. I heard a bit of a low laugh behind me, and there was Warrigal with all his white teeth showing.

"My word," he said, "didn't he frighten 'em?" There was two more of 'em wanted Moran for captain, but they wasn't game to speak. I never see the man that could talk to him. Jim and I often wondered what it was that made Warrigal so out-and-out bound up with Starlight. When he wasn't talking you'd see his eyes follow him about like a collie dog does his master. I believe there was something about Starlight's saving his life when he was a little chap, but that couldn't have been all of it. There's a many people in this world as you might save their lives half-a-dozen times over and they wouldn't so much as say "Thank you," let alone give up their own for you, as I believe this chap would

do, or let himself be cut up in little bits for him any day. There's some things as can't be made out, and this is one of 'em. I've seen dogs as would do that kind of thing, and a woman here and there, but I'm dashed if Warrigal wasn't the only man I ever met as seemed to live his life in another's. I believe he'd almost bleed to death if anyone had stuck a knife into Starlight deep enough to hurt him.

After this we began to talk more free and easy and pleasant like. We had to fix the place to do the sticking-up, the number of men to meet each other at a particular hour, the time to make the rush, the men that were to ride, them that were to go on foot, them that were to lead the pack-horses.

Then to settle where the gold was to be brought to and where it was to be divided in case the gold escort robbery—for that, of course, was the game we were after—came off right.

The gold was to be divided into so many shares. If any man was shot dead his share was to go to his friends. The next week was the end of the month. There had been some heavy washings-up, and we heard that the next escort was more likely to be twelve or fifteen thousand ounces than ten. There were some cakes of re-torted gold, too; one of them nearly two thousand ounces. The Golden Gate claim had washed up just before. We knew it always made a deal of difference to the escort it was sent down with.

One thing went a lot against the grain with us—that is, with Jim, and me, and Starlight. It was that some of the gold we were going to have, if we could, belonged to diggers—working men like ourselves, and that we'd always been good friends and mates with all the time

we'd been at Turon. They'd worked hard for it, as we knew, and never done us any harm. Quite the other way.

Most of the small lots of gold had been bought by the banks. We didn't mind them, thinking, like our class generally, that banks had lots of money, and could afford to lose it. But the Golden Gate and two or three other claims always sent down their own gold to Sydney in separate parcels. It would be hard upon them to lose it, but we supposed the Government would make it up to them if it was taken while under their charge. This turned out to be all wrong; the Government did not hold themselves responsible. They charged so much an ounce for forwarding it, and took as good care as they could, but they did not run the risk of loss, as the diggers found afterwards to their cost.

Before we left it was all settled that the gold should be brought to a place in the mountains, and divided there if we couldn't do it on the spot. The other men didn't know much about weights and measures, but they said they'd have a man there who did know, and we agreed. When we heard his name it stunned us above a bit, but dad only grinned. He knew about him before, and that he was ready enough to stand in with any robbery so long as he got paid and his name was kept out of it. We were not to pay him anything, but they might if they liked, and he was to sell their share for them. Then there was the "bail-up place" to fix. There was nothing half so good, they all said, as Eugowra Rocks—a narrow track, with a longish hill and great boulders of granite on each side of the road, where 20 men could lie in plant and no one have a chance of spotting them till it was too late. The escort drag was

always obliged to go slow there. They didn't reach the place till close up dark, and there would be quite light enough afterwards to do what we wanted.

It was settled where we were all to meet in the afternoon, seven or eight miles from Eugowra. Our lot, of course, would be together, and the rest would muster up by twos and threes, so as not to set people thinking we were bound for a regular put-up thing. They'd find out soon enough what we were after.

All the time we were there Jim stood up against a tree, and hardly said a word to anyone. He just passed the time of day to those as gave it to him, and that's all. Some of them tried to talk to him a bit, but it was no use, and they went off. He wasn't a man most people liked to interfere with. Besides, they'd heard he'd got married and left his wife behind him when he had to cut from the Turon, and they thought it was natural enough he should feel bad about it. One or two of them would have liked to have left their wives there and never heard tell 'em again. It was all through Joe Wall's wife that he turned out, and gave up a good little run and stock enough to keep him comfortable all his life; but that says nothing. They all heard Jim's wife was one of the right sort, and good-looking to the bargain; so they knew how it was, and pitied him. He'd fight all the better for it, anyhow.

The sun was near down when we started for home, and it was late enough when we got there dark as pitch, too, for a storm came on, and you couldn't see your horse's head in front of you. I often wonder how we got through this and lots of other nights, riding without knocking our brains out against trees, or riding over

drops and places deep enough to smash us and our horses to bits.

The only thing was that Warrigal knew every foot of the country night or day, and he could see in the dark, I really believe, like a cat. He went first, and we all followed, one after the other. The horses did the most of it themselves, and wonderful animals they are. They'd put their heads down, and seem to smell out the right track to take. Sometimes we'd get a crack from an overhanging bough, but we weren't going fast. There was no place to camp, and our horses were not that valuable, Starlight said, that it mattered much one way or the other.

Next morning we had nothing to do of course, and plenty of time to think it all over. We were none of us sorry that the thing was settled, and the battle bound to come off. We were like soldiers in camp, only they're safe as long as they stay in them, except fever gets among 'em and the enemy presses 'em day and night. I daresay they think they might as well be killed one way as the other. Better die fighting, with the chance of a step or a good lump of prize money. Anyhow, there's nothing a man, that is a man, hates as much as he does doing nothing; and the more he's got on his mind that hurts and stings him every time he runs it over, the more wild he is for something that'll clear it all off and give him something fresh to think about.

CHAPTER VIII.

Now we had something to think about the time didn't pass so slow. No end of things had to be looked after,

you bet. What we were going to tackle was no foolish boy's play; there was no use going at it bullheaded, and not having everything all square and regular beforehand. So we tackled the work in real earnest---much like as if we were going a long overlanding journey, and it was no use looking for things to be got on the road. A long journey it might be for some of us, but we didn't bother our heads about that. It was all in the day's work.

Father was in great buckle, and as busy as a knock-about man when the super's looking at him. There was all the saddles and bridles to see to; some of 'em wanted stuffing and mending up. He was as good as a regular saddler, was father, at that game, and had tools and needles, cobbler's wax, and all the rest of it, handy in a box he kept in the cave.

Then there were the horses; we had them to get up and exercise a bit, and get into trim. They wanted to be pretty fit. They would have to go their darn'dest---as Arizona Bill used to say---that day, if they never went again.

It was just far enough for us to ride over from the Hollow and get back again within the twenty-four hours; and a good pull, too. It wouldn't do for us to camp that night anywhere within reach of the camp. The police would be out like so many packs of hounds all over the country; not a gully or a creek within fifty miles they wouldn't be through and over.

We had to bring spare horses and pack-saddles with us for our share. Warrigal could lead one and dad the other. They required to be fast and strong, too. They'd have a heavyish weight to carry, and to keep up a cruel pace all the way back to the Hollow, mostly in the dark, and over a brutal rough road. Often and often have I

sworn at it; and the day I first rode there the pack-saddles had to be girthed and surcingled up that tight that you'd think they'd cut a horse in two, to keep them from slipping and rolling about. It wouldn't do to have 'em turn underneath the horses' bellies.

Then there were our own fancy nags. Starlight, of course, wasn't likely to mount anything but Rainbow. He was in grand trim, sure enough, and looked like a king, as he was. He'd been ridden and exercised every day since we'd come back, and he'd hardened a bit, and was fit to go for a man's life if ever a horse was. His neck was like iron, and his legs as clean as a three-year-old. He looked as if he'd never done a day's work in his life.

"I wonder what they'd think of the old horse in the desert?" says Starlight; "he has some Arab blood in him. I'd like to run him a three-mile race, owners up, against the best stallion in the Nejd. He'd have the pull for pace, of course, and if the Aneyzah can stay better than he can, they're worthy of all the lies that have been told about them, and that's a wide word."

"If there's gamer horses than Rainbow, it must be in another and better world," I says; "there may be as good, but there's no better in Arabia, or anywhere else under the sun."

"We'll have to try his pace and pluck next Friday," says Starlight. "That'll be our Waterloo day. We'll see who comes best out of it."

Starlight was quite cheerful now. His eyes were brighter, and his step as light again. Even Jim began to look a little more alive. He'd got up his horse, and began to take a sort of interest in him. One of the

horses we brought over had died, but it was mine, not his, and I was glad of it. It set him up rather; he was fond of his old horse, and it pleased him to see how well he was looking. I didn't care much. I knew I could get as good a one out of the mob in the Hollow, though of course there's something in being used to a horse, and him being used to you.

As for arms, we all had revolvers, and mighty good ones, too. We had plenty of cartridges, and we used to amuse ourselves and have a little practice besides every evening, to see if we'd kept up our shooting. Starlight was wonderful good. He could knock the middle pip out of the five of hearts at twenty yards, and do a lot of other fancy shooting. Jim came next, and then me and Warrigal. Father could beat us all with the shot-gun, and at shooting flying. He seldom bothered himself with carrying a revolver. I made up my mind to take the little Ballard repeating rifle that old Arizona Bill gave me. It was not much heavier than a navy revolver, and I'd seen how straight she could carry. Starlight always had a Derringer in his waistcoat pocket, besides his regular navy Colt. I never liked them. I was always in a funk they'd go off by mistake and shoot whoever carried 'em.

We were desperate fidgety and anxious till the day came. While we were getting ready two or three things went wrong, of course. Jim got a letter from Jeanie, all the way from Melbourne, where she'd gone. It seems she'd got her money from the bank—Jim's share of the gold—all right. She was a saving, careful little woman, and she told him she'd enough to keep them both well for four or five years, anyhow. What she wanted him to do was to promise that he'd never be mixed up in any

more dishonest work, and to come away down to her at once.

"It was the easiest thing in the world," she said, "to get away from Melbourne to England or America. Ships were going every day, and glad to take any man that was strong and willing to work his passage for nothing; they'd pay him besides."

She'd met one or two friends down there as would do anything to help her and him. If he would only get down to Melbourne all would yet be well; but she begged and prayed him, if he loved her, and for the sake of the life she hoped to live with him yet, to come away from his companions and take his own Jeanie's advice, and try and do nothing wrong for the future.

If Jim had got his letter before we made up matters, just at the last he'd have chucked up the sponge and cleared out for good and all. He as good as said so; but he was one of them kind of men that once he'd made a start never turned back. There'd been some chaff, to make things worse, between Moran and Daly and some of the other fellows about being game and what not, specially after what father said at the hut, so he wouldn't draw out of it now.

I could see it fretted him worse than anything since we came back, but he filled himself up with the idea that we'd be sure to get the gold all right, and clear out different ways to the coast, and then we'd have something worth while leaving off with. Another thing, we'd been all used to having what money we wanted lately, and we none of us fancied living like poor men again in America or anywhere else. We hadn't had hardly a scrap from Aileen since we'd come back this last time.

It wasn't much odds. She was regular broken-hearted; you could see it in every line.

"She had been foolish enough to hope for better things," she said; "now she expected nothing more in this world, and was contented to wear out her miserable life the best way she could. If it wasn't that her religion told her it was wrong, and that mother depended on her, she'd drown herself in the creek before the door. She couldn't think why some people were brought into this miserable world at all. Our family had been marked out to evil, and the same fate would follow us to the end. She was sorry for Jim, and believed if he had been let take his own road that he would have been happy and prosperous to-day. It was a pity he could not have got away safely to Melbourne with his wife before that wicked woman, who deserved to be burnt alive, ruined everything. Even now we might all escape, the country seemed in so much confusion with all the strangers and bad people" (bad people—well, everyone thinks their own crowd the blackest) "that the goldfields had brought into it, that it wouldn't be hard to get away in a ship somehow. If nothing else bad turned up perhaps it might come to pass yet."

This was the only writing we'd had from poor Aileen. It began all misery and bitterness, but got a little better at the end. If she and Gracey could have got hold of Kate Morrison there wouldn't have been much left of her in a quarter of an hour, I could see that.

Inside was a little bit of paper with one line, "For my sake," that was all. I knew the writing; there was no more. I could see what Gracey meant, and wished over and over again that I had the chance of going straight, as I'd wished a thousand times before, but it

was too late, too late! When the coach is running down hill and the break's off, it's no use trying to turn. We had all our plan laid out and settled to the smallest thing. We were to meet near Eugowra Rocks a good hour or two before the escort passed, so as to have everything ready. I remember the day as well as if it was yesterday. We were all in great buckle and very fit, certainly. I don't think I ever felt better in my life. There must be something out-and-out spiriting in a real battle when a bit of a scrimmage like this sent our blood boiling through our veins; made us feel as if we weren't plain Dick and Jim Marston, but regular grand fellows, in a manner of speaking. What fools men are when they're young—and sometimes after that itself—to be sure.

We started at daylight, and only stopped once on the road for a bite for ourselves and to water the horses, so that we were in good time. We brought a little corn with us, just to give the horses something; they'd be tied up for hours and hours when we got to the place pitched on. They were all there before us; they hadn't as good horses by a long chalk as we had, and two of their packers were poor enough. Jim and I were riding ahead with Starlight a little on the right of us. When the fellows saw Rainbow they all came crowding round him as if he'd been a show.

"By George!" says Burke, "that's a horse worth calling a horse, Captain. I often heard tell of him, but never set eyes on him before. I've two minds to shake him and leave you my horse and a share of the gold to boot. I never saw his equal in my life, and I've seen some plums too."

"Honour among—well—bushrangers, eh, Burke?"

says Starlight, cheerily. "He's the right sort, isn't he? We shall want good goers to-night. Are we all here now? We'd better get to business."

Yes, they were all there, a lot of well-built, upstanding chaps, young and strong, and fit to do anything that a man could do in the way of work or play. It was a shame to see them there (and us too for the matter of that), but there was no get away now. There will be fools and rogues to the end of the world, I expect. Even Moran looked a bit brighter than he did last time. He was one of those chaps that a bit of real danger smartens up. As for Burke, Daly, and Hulbert, they were like a lot of schoolboys, so full of their fun and larks.

Starlight just spoke a word to them all; he didn't talk much, but looked hard and stern about the face, as a captain ought to do. He rode up to the gap and saw where the trees had been cut down to block up the road. It would be hard work getting the coach through there now—for a bit to come.

After that our horses and the two packers were left behind with Warrigal and father, close enough for hearing, but well out of the way for seeing; it was behind a thick belt of timber. They tied up some to trees and short-hobbled others, keeping them all so as to be ready at a moment's notice. Our men hid themselves behind rocks and stumps on the high side of the road so as they could see well, and had all the shadow on their side. Wall and Hulbert and their lot had their mob of horses, packers, and all planted away, and two young fellows belonging to their crowd minding them.

We'd been ready a good bit when a cove comes tearing up full batt. We were watching to see how he

shaped, and whether he looked likely to lay on the police, when I saw it was Billy the Boy.

"Now I call this something like," says he, pulling up short: "army in readiness, the enemy not far off. My word, it is a fine thing to turn out, ain't it, Dick? Do you chaps feel shaky at all? Ain't yer gallied the least little bit? They're a-comin'!"

"How long will they be?" Starlight said. "Just remember that you're not skylarking at a pound-yard, my boy."

"All right, Captain," he answered, quiet enough. "I started on ahead the moment I saw 'em leave the camp. They're safe to be here in ten minutes now. You can see 'em when they come into the flat. I'll clear out to the back for a bit. I want 'em to think I come up permiskus-like when it's over." So the young rascal galloped away till the trees hid him, and in a quarter of an hour more we saw the leaders of the four-horse drag that carried the escort gold turn round on the forest road and show out into the flat.

It gave me a queer feeling just at first. We hadn't been used to firing on the Queen's servants, not in cold blood, anyhow, but it was them or us for it now. There was no time to think about it. They came along at a steady trot up the hill. We knew the Turon sergeant of police that drove, a tall man with a big black beard to his chest. He had been in an English dragoon regiment, and could handle the ribbons above a bit. He had a trooper alongside him on the box with his rifle between his knees. Two more were in the body of the drag. They had put their rifles down and were talking and laughing, not expecting anything sudden. Two more of the mounted men rode in front, but not far.

The couple behind were a good way off. All of a sudden the men in front came on the trees lying across the road. They pulled up short, and one of them jumped down and looked to see if anything could be done to move them. The other man held his horse. The coach drove up close, so that they were bunched up pretty well together.

"Who the devil has been doing that?" sung out the sergeant. "Just as if the road isn't bad enough without these infernal lazy scoundrels of bullock-drivers cutting down trees to make us go round. It's a beastly track here at the best of times."

"I believe them trees have been fallen on purpose," says the trooper that was down. "There's been men, and horses too, about here to-day, by the tracks. They're up to no good!"

"Fire!"

The order was given in Starlight's clear, bold voice. Just like a horn it sounded. You might have heard it twice as far off. A dozen shots followed the next second, making as much row as fifty because of the way the sound echoed among the rocks.

I never saw a bigger surprise in my life, and wasn't likely to do, as this was my first regular battle. We had plenty of time to take aim, and just at first it looked as if the whole blessed lot of the police was killed and wounded.

The sergeant threw up his arms and fell off the box like a log, just under the horses' feet. One of the troopers on ahead dropped, he that was holding the horses, and both horses started off at full gallop. The two men in the body of the drag were both hit—one badly. So when the two troopers came up full gallop

from the back they found us cutting the traces of the team, that was all plunging like mad, and letting the horses go.

We opened fire at them directly they showed themselves; of course they couldn't do much in the face of a dozen men, all well armed and behind good cover. They kept it up for a bit till one of their horses was hit, and then made tracks for Turon to report that the escort had been stuck up by 20 or 30 men at Eugowra Rocks—the others had come up with the pack-horses by this time, along with Master Billy the Boy firing his revolver and shouting enough for half-a-dozen; so we looked a big crowd—that all the men were shot dead, wounded, or taken prisoners, and that a strong force had better be despatched at once to recapture the gold.

A good deal of this was true, though not all. The only man killed was the sergeant. He was shot clean through the heart and never stirred again. Of the five other men, three were badly wounded and two slightly. We attended to them as we could, and tied the others so that they would not be able to give any bother for an hour or two at any rate.

Then the trouble began about dividing the gold. We opened the sort of locker there was in the centre of the coach and took out the square boxes of gold. They held canvas bags, all labelled and weighed to the grain, of about 1,000 oz. each. There were fourteen boxes in all. Not a bad haul.

Some of the others couldn't read or write, and they wouldn't trust us, so they brought their friend with them, who was an educated man sure enough. We were a bit stunned to see him, holding the sort of position he did at the Turon. But there he was, and he did his work well enough. He brought a pair of scales with him and

weighed the lot, and portioned it all out amongst us just the same as Mr. Scott, the banker, used to do for us at the Turon when we brought in our month's washing-up. We had 5,000 oz. Starlight had an extra share on account of being captain, and the rest had somewhere about 8,000 oz. 9,000 oz. among them. It wasn't so bad.

Dad wasn't long before he had our lot safely packed and on his two pack-horses. Warrigal and he cleared out at a trot, and went out of sight in a jiffey. It was every man for himself now. We waited a bit to help them with their swag; it was awful heavy. We told them that their pack-horses would never carry it if there was anything of close run for it.

"Suppose you think you've got the only good horse in the country, Dick Marston," says Daly. "We'll find a horse to run anything you've got, barrin' Rainbow. I've got a little roan horse here as shall run ever a horse ye own, for three mile, for a hundred notes, with twelve stone up. What do you think of that, now?"

"Don't take your shirt off, Patsey," I said. "I know the roan's as good as ever was foaled" (so he was; the police got him after Patsey was done for, and kept him till he died of old age), "but he's in no condition. I'm talking of the pack-horses; they're not up to much, as you'll find out."

We didn't want to rush off at once, for fear the other fellows might say something afterwards if anything happened cross. So we saw them make a fair start for a spot on Weddin Mountain, were they thought they were right. We didn't think we could be caught once we made tracks in earnest. After a couple or three hours' riding we should be pretty safe, and daylight would see us at the Hollow.

We stopped, besides, to do what we could for the wounded men. They were none of them regularly done for, except the sergeant. One man was shot through the lungs, and was breathing out blood every now and then. We gave them some brandy and water, and covered them all up and left them as comfortable as we could. Besides that, we sent Billy the Boy, who couldn't be recognized, to the camp to have a doctor sent as soon as possible. Then we cleared and started off, not the way we had to go, but so as we could turn into it.

We couldn't ride very slow after such a turn as that, so we made the pace pretty hot for the first twenty miles or so. By Jove! it was a great ride; the forest was middling open, and we went three parts speed when we could see before us. The horses seemed to go as if they knew there was something up. I can see Rainbow now, swinging along with that beautiful bounding style of going he had, snorting now and then and sending out his legs as if one hundred miles, more or less, was nothing. His head up, his eye shining like a star, his nostrils open, and every now and then, if anything got up, he'd give a snort as if he'd just come up out of the bush. They'd had a longish day and a fast ride before they got to Eugowra, just enough to eat to keep them from starving, with a drink of water. Now they were going the same style back, and they'd never had the saddles off their backs. All the night through we rode before we got to the top of Nulla Mountain; very glad to see it we were then. We took it easy for a few miles now and again, then we'd push on again. We felt awful sleepy at times; we'd been up and at it since the morning before daylight, too. The strangeness and the chance of being followed

kept us up, else I believe we'd have dropped off our horses' backs, regular dead beat.

We lost ground now and then through Warrigal not being there to guide us, but Jim took the lead and he wasn't far out; besides, the horses knew which way to steer for their grass at the Hollow. They wouldn't let us go much off the line if it was ever so dark. We gave 'em their heads mostly. The sun was just rising as we rode across the last tableland. We got off and stumbled along, horses and men, down the track to the Hollow. Dad and Warrigal hadn't come back; of course they couldn't stand the pace we did. They'd have to camp for a bit, but they both knew of plants and hiding holes, where all the police in the colony couldn't find them. We knew they'd turn up some time next day. So we let go our horses, and after a bit of supper laid down and slept till well on in the afternoon.

When I looked round I saw the dog sleeping at Jim's feet, old Crib. He never left father very far, so of course the old man must be home, or pretty close up. I was that dead beat and tired out that I turned over and went to sleep for another couple of hours. When I next woke up I was right and felt rested, so I put on my things, had a good wash, and went out to speak to father. He was sitting by the fire outside smoking, just as if he'd never been away.

CHAPTER IX.

"WE done that job to rights if we never done another, eh, lad?" says father, reaching out for a coal to put in his pipe.

"Seems like it," I said. "There'll be a deuce of a bobbery about it. We shan't be able to move for a bit, let alone clear out."

"We'll show 'em a trick or two yet," says dad. I could see he'd had a tot, early as it was. "I wonder how them chaps got on? But we'll hear soon."

"How shall we hear anything? Nobody'll be mad enough to show out of here for a bit."

"I could get word here," says father, "if there was a police barrack on the top of Nulla Mountain. I've done it afore, and I can do it again."

"Well, I hope it won't be long, for I'm pretty full up of this staying-at-home business in the Hollow. It's well enough for a bit, but it's awful slow when you've too much of it."

"It wouldn't be very slow if we was all grabbed and tried for our lives, Mr. Dick Marston. Would ye like that better for a change?" says the old man, showing his teeth like a dog that's making up his mind to have ye and don't see where he's to get first bite. "You leave the thing to them as knows more than you do, or you'll find yourself took in, and that precious sharp."

"You'll find your pals, Burke and Moran, and their lot will have their turn first," I said, and with that I walked off, for I saw the old man had been drinking a bit after his night's work, and that always started his temper the wrong way. There was no doing anything with him then, as I knew by long experience. I was going to ask him where he'd put the gold, but thought it best to leave that for some other time.

By-and-bye, when we all turned out and had some breakfast, we took a bit of a walk by ourselves and talked it over. We could hardly think it was all done and over.

"The gold escort stuck up. Fourteen thousand ounces of gold taken. Sergeant Hawkins shot dead. The robbers safe off with their booty."

This is the sort of thing that we were sure to see in all the papers. It would make a row and no mistake. It was the first time such a thing had been thought of, much less carried out "to rights," as father said, "in any of the colonies." We had the five thousand ounces of gold, safe enough, too. That was something; whether we should be let enjoy it, or what chance we had of getting right away out of the country, was quite another matter. We were all sorry for Sergeant Hawkins, and would have been better pleased if he'd been only wounded like the others. But these sorts of things couldn't be helped. It was the fortune of war; his luck this time, ours next. We knew what we had to expect. Nothing would make much difference. "As well be hung for a sheep as a lamb." We were up to our necks in it now, and must fight our way out the best way we could.

Bar any man betraying the secret of the Hollow we might be safe for years to come, as long as we were not shot or taken in fair fight. And who was to let out the secret? No one but ourselves had the least notion of the track or where it led to, or of such a place as the Hollow being in the colony. Only us five were in possession of the secret. We never let any of these other men come near, much less to it. We took good care never to meet them within twenty miles of it. Father was a man that, even when he was drunk, never let out what he didn't want other people to know. Jim and I and Starlight were not likely to blab, and Warrigal would have had his throat cut sooner than let on about anything that might be against Starlight, or that he told him not to do,

We had good reason, then, to think ourselves safe as long as we had such a place to make for whenever we were in danger or had done a stroke. We had enough in gold and cash to keep us comfortable in any other country—provided we could only get there. That was the rub. When we'd got a glass or two in our heads we thought it was easy enough to get across country, or to make away one by one at shearing time, disguised as swagsmen, to the coast. But when we thought it over carefully in the mornings, particularly when we were a bit nervous after the grog had died out of us, it seemed a rather blue look out.

There was the whole country side pretty thick with police stations, where every man, from the sergeant to the last-joined recruit, knew the height, size, colour of hair, and so on of every one of us. If a suspicious-looking man was seen or heard of within miles the telegraph wires could be set to work. He could be met, stopped, searched, and overhauled. What chance would any of us have then?

"Don't flatter yourselves, my boy," Starlight said, when we'd got the length of thinking how it was to be done, "that there's any little bit of a chance, for a year or two at any rate, of getting away. Not a kangaroo rat could hop across from one scrub to another if there was the least suspicion upon him without being blocked or run into. Jim, old man, I'm sorry for you, but my belief is we're quartered here for a year or two certain, and the sooner we make up our minds to it the better."

Here poor old Jim groaned. "Don't you think," he said, quite timid-like, "that about shearing-time a man might take his chance, leading an old horse with a swag

on, as if he wanted to get shearing in some of the big down-the-river sheds?"

"Not a bit of it," says Starlight. "You're such a good-looking, upstanding chap that you're safe to be pulled up and made answer for yourself before you'd get 50 miles. If you rode a good horse they'd think you were too smart-looking for a regular shearer and nail you at once."

"But I'd take an old screw with a big leg," pleaded Jim. "Haven't I often seen a cove walking and leading one just to carry his blankets and things?"

"Then they'd know a chap like you, full of work and a native to boot, ought to have a better turnout—if it wasn't a stall. So they'd have you for that."

"But there's Isaac Lawson and Campbelltown. You've seen them. Isaac's an inch taller than me, and the same cut and make. Why shouldn't they shop them when they're going shearing? They're square enough, and always was. And Campbelltown's a good deal like Dick, beard and all."

"Well, I'll bet you a new meerschaum that both men are arrested on suspicion before shearing. Of course they'll let them go again; but, you mark my words, they'll be stopped, as well as dozens of others. That will show how close the search will be."

"I don't care," says Jim, in his old, obstinate way, which he never put on except very seldom. "I'll go in a month or two—police or no police. I'll make for Melbourne if there was an army of soldiers between me and Jeanie."

We had to settle where the gold was to be hid. After a lot of talk we agreed to keep one bag in a hole in the side of the wall of the cave, and bury the others in the

place where we'd found old Mr. Devereux's box. His treasure had laid many a year safe and sound without anybody touching it, and we thought ours might do the same. Besides, to find it they must get into the Hollow first. So we packed it out bag by bag, and made an iron-bark coffin for it, and buried it away there, and put some couch-grass turfs on it. We knew they'd soon grow up, and nobody could tell that it hadn't always been covered up the same as the rest of the old garden.

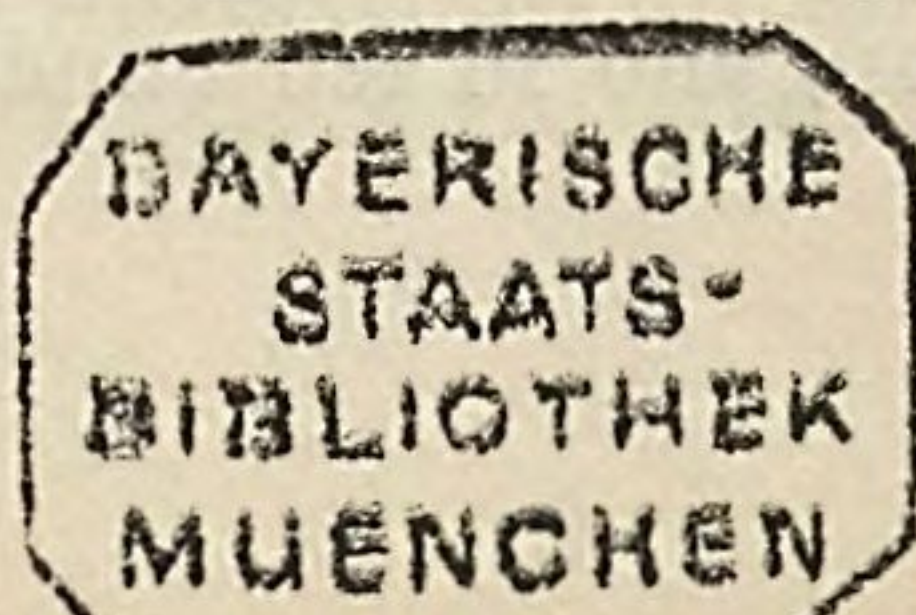
It felt pretty hard lines to think we shouldn't be able to get away from this lonely place after the life we'd led the last year; but Starlight wasn't often wrong, and we came to the same way of thinking ourselves when we looked at it all round, steady and quiet like.

We'd been a week or ten days all by ourselves, horse-breaking, fishing, and shooting a bit, thinking how strange it was that we should have more than £20,000 in gold and money and not be able to do anything with it, when dad, sudden like, said he'd go out himself and get some of the newspapers, and perhaps a letter or two if any came.

Starlight laughed at him a bit for being fool-hardy, and said we should hear of his being caught and committed for trial. "Why, they'll know the dog," says he, "and make him give evidence in Court. I've known that done before now. Inspector Merlin nailed a chap through his dog."

Father grinned. "I know'd that case—a sheep-stealing one. They wanted to make out Brummy was the man as owned the dorg—a remarkable dorg he was, too, and had been seen driving the sheep."

"Well, what did the dog do? Identify the prisoner, didn't he?"



"Well, the dashed fool of a cooley did. Jumps up as soon as he was brought into Court, and whines and scratches at the dock rails and barks, and goes on tremenjus, trying to get at Brummy."

"How did his master like it?"

"Oh! Brummy? He looked as black as the ace of spades. He'd have made it hot for that dorg if he could ha' got at him. But I suppose he forgived him when he came out."

"Why should he?"

"Because the jury fetched him in guilty without leaving the box, and the Judge give him seven years. You wouldn't find this old varmint a-doin' no such foolishness as that."

Here he looks at Crib, as was lyin' down a good way off, and not letting on to know anything. He saw father's old mare brought up, though, and saddled, and knowed quite well what that meant. He never rode her unless he was going out of the Hollow.

"I believe that dog could stick up a man himself as well as some fellows we know," says Starlight, "and he'd do it, too, if your father gave him the word."

* * * * *

I never could make out, for ever so long, where dad went to get the newspapers he showed us, and his letters besides. Letters he got—plenty of 'em—though he couldn't read nor write. Of course someone read 'em for him. Who it could be to be trusted that much I never could think. The story about the dog in Court seemed to put him into an extra good humour.

"You can come, Dick," he says, "if you ain't afeard of being took." Then he looked over at Starlight. I got my horse sharp, and in ten minutes we were off.

Twenty miles and more to the east of us was an outstation of Mr. Falkland's. A rocky, thick place, with a few open ridges, well grassed, and just up to keeping one strong flock of sheep all the year round.

When we got near the place the road was rough enough; nothing but wild horse and cattle tracks to be seen near it. Dad gets off, and we hobbled out our horses where there was a bit of grass at the foot of a big rock. Then we walks over to a small creek with springs in it, and follows it down to a hut and sheep-yard. My word! it was a lonesome spot to live, sure enough.

We went into the hut; so neat and clean it was. A "hatter" of course the shepherd would be; bed made up, kindling wood for next day's fire in the corner; a shelf with a few books, a sheepskin mat or two on the floor, and a pair of old boots cut down for slippers. A bit of a table made of two boards, with the legs stuck in the ground, a slab form outside the door, and two three-legged stools inside.

Father takes the frying pan, it had some fat in it. He finds a leg and loin of mutton hung up in a bag, with some damper. I made up the fire, and we soon fried some chops. There was plenty of tea in the kettle; it only wanted warming up. Father took a pound of good tobacco out of his coat pocket, and laid it on the shelf. We got the sugar and salt in a bit of a cupboard where all sorts of odds and ends were kept. We had a real good feed—mind you, we'd been four hours coming that five-and-twenty mile, and hard going to do that. After that away we went, and tracked about till we saw which way the sheep went out in the morning. We cut the fresh tracks at last, and followed on till we could see the line a shepherd would most likely take along a gully.

After another hour we came upon the flock camped, and all comfortable—a fine-looking lot of sheep too—on a little bit of flat by the water. It was the middle of the day, and warmish by this time.

The shepherd was sitting on a log with his dog beside him, and taking it easy, as all shepherds do, until it was time to start and feed quietly home.

“Well, Davy,” says father, “Davy Jones, had any dingoes about, old lad?”

That warn’t his name, dad told me afterwards. His real name was David Carstairs. He was a deal older man than father, and quite a different sort. No mistake about that. I often wondered what made them hang together so. A tall, broad-shouldered old fellow when he stood up, and had once been very upright you could see, like a soldier, which he had been. Now he was stooped, and beginning to get stiff in his joints. He must have been well over seventy years old. But he was that active still—more than you’d think—that with the help of a couple of good dogs he could manage his flock pretty well, old as he was. Mr. Falkland wasn’t the master to send away an old servant as long as he could crawl.

Davy had been with him getting on for twenty years, and a good shepherd all the time.

“Well, Poacher Ben,” he called out, quite hearty, when we walked up, “and ye’re no hangit. The Lord’s aye gracious. What new villainy are ye mediatin’ or carryin’ oot?”

“It makes no odds to you, Davy,” says father. “Anything come for me?”

“Maybe there is—maybe there isna,” says the old man, coolly.

There must have been something about him a deal

different from most men if father stood that. There were very few people liked to play with him, I tell you.

"Sae naething less will do ye than sticking up Her Majesty's gold escort, as they ca't, shooting and slaying a sergeant of police, and firing in cauld bluid upon men that's doin' their duty. Ben Marston, ye're a born deevil, weel I ken; but I didna' think ye had been sae bauld a son of Belial as yon comes to."

"You can't swear I was in it, nor no other man," growls father. "What's the good of putting everything on my back that happens in this blessed country?"

"Nae doot ye're sair belied," says the old chap, quietly chuckling to himself. "And the laddie Starlight and the twa bairnies—Richard, here, and Jeems—he was a bonnie lad, yon Jeems, I mind—were they no in it? Maybe ye were passin' by accidentally, and joost lookit in to see hoo things were ganging through. Maybe the auld doggie was no there? Ben Marston, ye'll no throw dust in my auld een."

"Who wants to throw dust in your eyes?" roars father. "Do you want me to send a letter to the p'leece saying where I'm to be found? When they catch me they'll have me, and not before. Give me my papers, and leave the devil asleep if you care for your life."

"Hooly, hooly!" says the old fellow, "I'm no to be freckened. Ye ken that. Ye'll have them a' in guid time. There was some only cam' yestreen. If I hadna takken thocht to ha' gone ootbye and passed the rock, there wad they ha' lain till the morn's morn, and ye'd no hae gettit them for a month—maybe never ava."

"Never's a long word, Davy," says father, lighting his pipe and sitting down quiet again like.

"And what for no?" says the old Scotch chap (what

a queer lingo it is, my word!). "Will ye no be hangit or shot, or ta'en and sent back to the wee wee cells we baith ken sae weel, and the iron brands, and the cauld and the heat, and the triangles, maybe, tho' I doot they canna flog noo."

"No fear, Davy," says father. "See this here little pistol," and here he pulls out his revolver. "We usen't to have 'em in those days, did we? Before I'd suffer myself to be took and stand my trial again, and have the whole thing twice over, I'd put this to my head and finish it once for all. Strike me blind if I wouldn't, and that quick."

"Deed, and I joost think ye wad, Poacher Ben; ye're an awfu' dour crater. It was a word and a blow wi' ye in them days, in the auld days. I'm 'feared to think o' them e'en noo. Weel, here's your letters; shall I open them and speer what is inside?"

"Yes, yes," says father, puffing away; "read 'em true, as ye always have. I can trust you, Davy."

"Ye may say that," says the old chap, quite solemn like.

"Weel, here's ane from John Barker" ("Cross-eyed Jack," says father). "Says there's a lot of unbranded calves of Mr. Lumsden's running near the gap, ten miles from Broken Creek. If you cop any, send him two pound."

"He be hanged!" growls father; "he'd better run 'em himself. He's a cowardly hound or he'd do it. Chuck it in the fire."

"William Crickmere" ("Flash Bill," says father). "Two lines. 'Police working near old cattle-track, Nulla; camped Rocky Creek.'"

"Well done! old Bill," he says. "There's five pounds, send him that."

"James Doherty: 'If you can send thirty good colts and twenty mares and fillies to the old place to work over the boundary, the money is there.'

"Can't do it now. Tell him he'd better send word to Tandragee."

"'Musterin' for fat cattle at Bandra and Doobajook next Monday week.' No name to this ane."

"I know who sent me that; it's all right," says father. "What's this?"

"That's from the puir, sair-hearted woman that ye swore to luv and cherish a' yer days, Ben Marston—in the han' of write of that fine weel-fa'ured lassie that has the ill-fortune to ca' ye father. Are ye no 'shamed to walk the airth, that have done waur to yer ain flesh and bluid than the beasts of the field? Answer me that, ye bauld and hardened sinner."

"Why didn't ye take to the parson racket when yer time was out?" sneers father. "Blest if ye can't patter better than half on 'em. You're the one man that I let talk to me that way, anyhow. Maybe ye'll convart me some day."

"On the day that ye saved this meeserable life, and that of anither that was a hunner times dearer to me, Ben Marston, I made a vow to Almighty God to do ye what sairvice I could to my deein' day. Have I no kept my oath?"

"David Jones, I ain't going for to deny it," says father. "You've done more for me than any man living ever did or will. You don't cotton to my ways, and never did. It stuns me as you could have stuck to me through it all, unless it was about the kid."

"Poacher, robber—murderer, I had amaist said—that ye are!" said the old man, "why is it that I, David Car-

stairs, that never stole the value of a bawbee in this long, wasted life; that was exiled and sent awa' to this wearifu' land for a sma' regimental offence—can ca' ye freend and brither, and do your bidding, evil as your ways are? Why is it but when I saw the blue eyes and the gowden locks o' my wee darling lassie—the child o' her that followed me from the auld country and died o' grief and shame in this new ane—go down beneath the pitiless wave my eyes darkened and my soul seemed to have quitted its habitation. Did they no, tell me that ye leapit in frae the forecastle of the prison ship, and the gale rising and the dark waves mounting, and when the boat was lowered and they brocht ye in mair deed than alive, did I no gae doon on my knees and vow a vow to the Lord of Life, to the Great Ruler o' the Universe? And I hae keepit the oath, as I shall answer to the Lord at the Last Day. I hae keepit my vow."

"And you're about the only chap, except Falkland, as *does* stick to his word in this country—to coves like me, anyhow," says father. "But stash all that woman's talk. D'ye see that there tree?" he says, fierce like, and hitting an old yellow box-tree a crash that would have barked most men's knuckles. "Yer might just as well talk to that blessed tree, and ye'd get as much good out of it. What's the old woman's pitch? I don't say it ain't rough on her."

Old Davey took a long look, half pity, half wonder at dad, and then he groans and opens the letter. It was thus. Aileen had wrote it, of course:—

"MY DEAR HUSBAND,

"We saw about everything in the papers. Our neighbours came over, and were very kind; but it was no use.

Nothing will be any use now. I think you might have let the boys go before you went into such a thing. Their blood will be on your head. I told you that long ago, and many a time and often. Send the youngest away, if it is possible at all; he might be saved. I have no hope for you others. May God pardon your sins and give us all time for repentance before death ends all. I have been very ill, but feel stronger now. The police seem always about the place. Your sorrowful wife."

"I'm dashed," says father, swearing a great oath, "if I don't make it hot for some of them traps if I catch 'em hanging about the old place. If they can't catch me, why should they go botherin' the old woman and the gal? Haven't they had enough to stand without that being put on 'em—as is innocent and always was. By ——— they don't know me yet; but they will some day, if they don't look out."

I never saw dad so put out. His eyes glared, his lips trembled; he looked like no man at all; like something just come to the earth for a bit, to go back again when his hour comes.

He didn't seem to think much of poor mother and Aileen in a general way, but now all of a sudden, because he took it into his head that the police were botherin' them, unfair like, and coming about the place more than they had a right to do, he was like a ragin' lion—worse, ever so much—like a devil let loose out of hell. I felt regular frightened, just as if I'd been a boy again.

After a bit he gives a sort of gulp, and says to the old man—

"The papers, the papers, Davy. It's time we was off. I'll send the half-caste chap next time."

The shepherd reached up a bundle of newspapers, all tied up together with a bit of green hide, and turns to his sheep that was drawin' off their camp and beginning to feed towards home.

"Hech; wad ye noo? Ye rintherout wastrel bodies in the lead—just rinning the inside oot o' the tail, and a' the steady sheep i' the flock. Hey, Yarrow, far yawd, far yawd, lad, gang roond them, Yarrow, boy."

One of the old dogs gets up and cuts away to the head of the flock like a Christian, sending back all the stray sheep that was makin' off like a lot of cattle out of a yard. Then when they steadied and began to draw along quiet and feed as they go, he regular sits down with his mouth open, laughin' to himself the way dogs laugh, as much as to say, "I slued ye there, old chaps."

"I must be off, Davy, old man," says father; "ye won't see me agin for a bit, maybe. I'll send next time."

"Ben Marston—Poacher Ben," says the old man, raising his hand, "something tells me ye're gaun on the road to evil faster and fiercer than ye were went—the braid path that leadeth to destruction. Aye—aye—were ye no tauld o' that in your youth? I doot ye were tauld naething—joost naething—and this is the fruit. But gin ye turn from yer ways, even noo, at the eleventh hour and repent, ye may be saved—saul and body, ye, and your household. Think o' me laddie here, and his mither greetin' at hame; and Aileen, that grand lassie; and Jeems, puir Jeems. Think on it, man; there's a saul within yer sinfu' carcass—and a heart, too, gin ane could find it. If ye quit not yer evil ways the end will be woe—woe and death—woe and death. Noo gang yer ways in peace!"

Father nodded, and moved away at a pretty quick walk, and me with him. I looked back after a bit, and there was the old man standing still in the same place, with his hand raised up and the afternoon sun blazing down on his white hair, brightening up the little green valley, the clear running water, even the very stones of the creek. He looked just like one of the old prophets that Aileen used to read to us about out of the Bible on Sunday evenings when we were boys. He was not speaking now, but his last words kept sounding in my ears: "Woe and death—woe and death—woe and death."

Father didn't talk for a bit—not till we got near the horses, that we found all right where we left them. Then he says—

"That's a queer old card, ain't he? I saved his little girl from drowning at sea, and he's paid me over and over agin for doin' a thing I couldn't help. He's about the second rale good man I ever seen; but he's mad about religion and that—must be. He thinks a man like me can *repent*."

CHAPTER X.

WE scuttled home pretty sharp after we mounted, and got back by dark easy enough. The road was rough, but father's old mare could spin over stones and through scrub, up hills and down gullies, most like a rock wal-laby. I never saw such a sure-footed brute. She was what they call a mountain horse, bred in those parts, most likely run in young out of a wild mob. What her blood was, of course, no one could tell. A deal of hair about her legs and quarters, strong enough to start a ton in a dray. But she'd never look through a collar in her

life, and hated the very sight of harness. She'd kick for five minutes if she heard a trace chain rattle. She had a trifle of vice in her way, was awful touchy, and not over quiet at the best of times with anyone but father. But she knew him, and though he showed her no mercy and rode her till she was close upon dead many a time, she'd do more for him than anyone else. It's the old story all the world over; it's not them that cares most for others that gets the best served. The other way on, as far as I see.

She was pretty well up in front for a mare, and had a goodish shoulder, well-laid back, and her legs and feet were like iron. As for cattle she knew them like a book, and could turn and twist, and stop and wheel, as if she understood what their very thoughts were. She'd open her mouth, and bite, too, if they hung back more than she liked in a thick place. She could gallop all day, and I believe if you'd pitched her down a well she'd have lit on her legs. Anybody would have thought my horse, by the looks of him, could have run away from her, instead of which, now she got her head set towards home, and dad, not in the best of temper, never thought of stopping for anything, it gave me all I knew to keep sight of him.

When we got in there was great laughing and chaffing about our sortie, as Starlight called it, to fetch in letters and a bundle of newspapers. There was no letter for poor Jim, which made him a bit miserabler than usual; but we opened the newspapers, and had a great read at them.

It ain't often that chaps like us have the chance of seeing such a lot about themselves in print; not that it spoke of us in a way that most people would have liked.

It was t'other way on mostly, and yet it was better, in a manner of speaking, than being taken no notice of at all.

How they did go in! You'd ha' thought the end of the world was come. They didn't know which to blame most—these were the respectable, solid sort of newspapers—"the atrocious villainy of the men who had planned and carried out the most daring crime that had ever been committed in the Australian colonies, the inefficiency of the police force, or the feebleness of the Government." My word! They got it hot all round; they let off nobody. Some of them thought it was because there hadn't been schools enough for the young growing boys and girls, or else they were the wrong sort. Others, that the clergymen hadn't done their duty in time past. You never heard such a bobbery as our bit of goldfields work, not according to the regulations, had kicked up.

First of all, it was pretty well known that most of the men concerned in it were natives. That everybody seemed to take very much to heart, and I don't so much wonder. If it had been worked by a lot of the riff-raff that had come from America and the old countries they wouldn't have felt it so much. Of course there were thousands of foreign rascals, robbers and murderers by profession, on the goldfields, who had spent their lives in that kind of work, from whom no better could be expected. The wonder was, when they came to think of it, that it shouldn't have struck some of 'em before and have been carried out—simple as it looked now it was done and over.

But what came hardest and was felt so bitter by all who had made New South Wales their home, and had a stake in it, was that all or nearly all of the escort robbers and murderers, for they were nothing short of this in in-

tention, were young men, none of 'em past five-and-twenty, born and brought up in the land, "sons of the soil," and all the rest of it.

"The premeditation with which the whole thing had been planned, the coolness and completeness with which it had been carried out, the cold-blooded carelessness as to shedding blood and taking life — all these" (the *Morning Advertiser* said) "were especially bad features in the case, and led to a most gloomy outlook upon the prospects of the rising generation of the land, and to that sense of ordinary morality without which communities could not exist."

Then the *Imperial* had an innings. "Were we ever to receive any adequate measure of police protection in requital for the enormous annual expenditure upon that department? Could anything have been more ludicrous than sending a force of half-a-dozen policemen" (there were eight, but that wouldn't sound so well) "to guard £60,000 worth of gold? Was it not a special temptation offered to a vagrant population, among whom were notoriously some of the boldest and most experienced 'fili-busters' the world could show? They had probably been anticipated, but was it unlikely that some particularly sensational act of spoliation would not take place if this puerile policy of temptation was adhered to? Would it not strike the man of culture that a parallel was afforded to the situation in which Lord Clive found himself, with the treasure house of the Nabob of Arcot at his disposal, concerning which he subsequently exclaimed, 'Good God! Mr. Speaker, when I think over it, I am astonished at my own moderation.'

"And does any well-wisher of this fair land desire this state of things to continue? We put this question

in all sorrow and sincerity to the Ministry, and—pause for a reply!”

“Well done! Haverton; very neatly put, Watty, old man. I call that very straight from the shoulder,” said Starlight. (We knew the reporter for the *Imperial* on the Turon, and many a supper of oysters and stout had we polished off together.) “Can’t you see him knocking off this for the night mail, sitting in that little hole of an office of his, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up, and a pot of beer beside him? Well, it’s all true enough, God knows; and it’s a pity, too. However, we can do nothing to help that now. The end must come some day. What does the other chap say—the *Turon Star*?” This was him:—

““We are weary, weary of writing upon this melancholy yet distracting theme. We can but reiterate our conviction that the Government are taking all human means for the discovery of the actors in this most gruesome tragedy—that the police are straining every nerve in the endeavour to fathom the mystery of the disappearance of the outlaws. It is satisfactory to have to announce the recovery of a large proportion of the stolen gold, which was discovered, after a close pursuit, upon the packhorses which the outlaws had been forced to abandon at the foot of the Weddin Mountains, to the fastnesses of which they were doubtless making their way.””

“So they were done after all. Dashed if I’m not glad of it,” says dad. “I told them the horses was nothing nigh up to the weight, nor in condition neither; and they was cussed cheeky over it too. Sarve ’em right; they’ll know better another time.”

"So I say, governor," says Starlight; "well, what comes next?"

"We are gratified to hear that the Government have offered a reward of one thousand pounds each for the capture of any of the band, and have, besides, caused sentence of outlawry to be legally pronounced against them.' "

"What's that last fakement?" says father, rather earnest like. "Thousand here or thousand there don't matter much as I knows of. Them that 'ud let on for a thousand 'ud let on for a hundred. The price don't make no sort of difference. But they think it does. But what's an outlaw? We're out o' law, and justice, too, far enough a'ready, ain't we?"

"Well, we're 'bold outlaws,' in one sense, as you very sensibly remark, governor; but not in another. Men have to be declared outlaws, and all that sort of thing, by a Judge in the regular way. We had to be called up to appear and answer for our crimes."

"And did they think we'd come?" said father.

"Probably not. But that leaves them at liberty to pronounce us legally outlaws. That being the case, any man may take us alive or dead, shoot us from behind a tree without notice. And the reward paid all the same for us, dead or alive. They're not obliged to call upon us to surrender in the Queen's name. We're henceforth like hunted wolves or mad dogs to our fellow-men. Everyone may join in the hue and cry that likes."

"Well, so they could afore," says father. "I don't see nothin' in it. If they take us they take us—that's all about it. It don't bring 'em no nearer to us that I see. It's the p'leece and us for it—the old thing. Them and their outlawry be blowed!"

The old man somehow seemed to think more than he liked to say about the outlawry question. It worried him as something he wasn't used to. Not that it made any difference, as he said at first, to men that knew their lives were forfeited whenever they could be surprised, overtaken, outfought, or betrayed. It was wonderful none of these things had happened to us yet. Our fortune might change any day, of course. But with luck and pluck, plenty of good horses, a thorough knowledge of the country, and the goodwill on the quiet of plenty of people who didn't want to see us run down, we might last a few years yet.

A thousand pounds a head was a good price, certainly! We were worth as much as so many imported bulls, Starlight said, to any men that could round us up and run us in. We were becoming more valuable, too, every day, in a manner of speaking, and there was no saying how much we mightn't be worth if we put in a few more years at our present profession. The worst of it was, none of the money would go into our own pockets; we were working for a reputation that was to benefit others, not ourselves. Starlight used to make us laugh sometimes in spite of ourselves, when he got into one of his mad humours, and went on talking like this.

While we were taking it easy, and except for the loneliness of it as safe as if we had been out of the country altogether, Moran and the other fellows hadn't quite such a good time of it. They were hunted from pillar to post by the police, who were mad to do something to meet the chaff that was always being cast up to them of having a lot of bushrangers robbing and shooting all over the country and not being able to take them. There were some out-of-the-way places enough in the

Weddin Mountains, but none like the Hollow, where they could lie quiet and untroubled for weeks together, if they wanted. Besides, they had lost their gold by their own foolishness in not having better pack-horses, and hadn't much to carry on with, and it's not a life that can be worked on the cheap, I can tell you, as we often found out. Money comes easy in our line, but it goes faster still, and a man must never be short of a pound or two to chuck about if he wants to keep his information fresh, and to have people working for him night and day with a will.

So they had some every-day sort of work cut out to keep themselves going, and it took them all their time to get from one part of the country where they were known to some other place where they weren't expected. Having out-and-out good hacks, and being all of them chaps that had been born in the bush and knew it like a book, it was wonderful how they managed to rob people at one place one day and then be at some place a hundred miles off the next. Ever so many times they came off, and they'd call one another Starlight and Marston, and so on, till the people got regularly dumbfounded, and couldn't tell which of the gang it was that seemed to be all over the country, and in two places at the same time. We used to laugh ourselves sometimes, when we'd hear tell that all the travellers passing Big Hill on a certain day were "stuck up by Wall's gang and robbed." Every man Jack that came along for hours was made to stand behind a clump of trees with two of the gang guarding them, so as the others couldn't see them as they came up. They all had to deliver up what they'd got about 'em, and no one was allowed to stir till sundown, for fear they should send word to the police. Then the

gang went off, telling them to stay where they were for an hour or else they'd come back and shoot them.

This would be on the western road, perhaps. Next day a station on the southern road, a hundred and twenty miles off, would be robbed by the same lot. Money and valuables taken away, and three or four of the best horses. Their own they'd leave behind in such a state that anyone could see how far and fast they'd been ridden.

They often got stood to, when they were hard up for a mount, and it was this way. The squatters weren't alike, by any manner of means, in their way of dealing with them. Many of them had lots of fine riding horses in their paddocks. These would be yarded some fine night, the best taken and ridden hard, perhaps returned next morning, perhaps in a day or two.

It was pretty well known who had used them, but nothing was said; the best policy some think is to hold a candle to the devil, especially when the devil's camped close handy to your paddock, and might any time sack your house, burn down your woolshed and stacks, or even shoot at your worshipful self if he didn't like the way you treated him and his imps.

These careful respectable people didn't show themselves too forward either in giving help or information to the police. Not by no means. They never encouraged them to stay when they came about the place, and weren't over that liberal in feeding their horses, or giving them a hand in any way, that they'd come again in a hurry. If they were asked about the bushrangers, or when they'd been last seen, they were very careful, and said as little as possible.

No one wonders at people like the Barnes's, or little

farmers, or the very small sort of settlers, people with one flock of sheep or a few cows, doing this sort of thing; they have a lot to lose and nothing to get if they gain ill-will. But regular country gentlemen, with big properties, lots of money, and all the rest of it, they're there to show a good example to the country side, whether it paid for the time or whether it didn't; and all us sort of chaps, on the cross or not, like them all the better for it.

When I say all of us, I don't mean Moran. A sulky, black-hearted, revengeful brute he always was—I don't think he'd any manly feeling about him. He was a half-bred gipsy, they told us that knew where he was reared, and Starlight said gipsy blood was a queer cross, for devilry and hardness it couldn't be beat; he didn't wonder a bit at Moran's being the scoundrel he was.

No doubt he "had it in" for more than one of the people who helped the police to chevy Wall and his lot about. From what I knew of him I was sure he'd do some mischief one of these days, and make all the country ten times as hot against us as they were now. He had no mercy about him. He'd rather shoot a man any day than not; and he'd burn a house down just for the pleasure of seeing how the owner looked when it was lighted.

Starlight used to say he despised men that tried to save themselves cowardly-like more than he could say, and thought them worse than the bushrangers themselves. Some of them were big people, too.

But other country gentlemen, like Mr. Falkland, were quite of a different pattern. If they all acted like him I don't think we should any of us have reigned as long as we did. They helped and encouraged the police in every possible way. They sent them information when-

ever they had received any worth while. They lent them horses freely when their own were tired out and beaten. More than that, when bushrangers were supposed to be in the neighbourhood they went out with them themselves, lying out and watching through the long cold nights, and taking their chance of a shot as well as those that were paid for it.

Now there was a Mr. Whitman that had never let go a chance from the start of running their trail with the police, and had more than once given them all they knew to get away. He was a native of the country, like themselves, a first-class horseman and tracker, a hardy, game sort of a chap that thought nothing of being twenty-four hours in the saddle, or sitting under a fence watching for the whole of a frosty night.

Well, he was pretty close to Moran once, who had been out by himself; that close he ran him he made him drop his rifle and ride for his life. Moran never forgave him for this, and one day when they had all been drinking pretty heavy he managed to persuade Wall, Hulbert, Burke and Daly to come with him and stick up Whitman's house.

"I sent word to him I'd pay him out one of these fine days," he drawled out, "and he'll find that Dan Moran can keep his word."

He picked a time when he knew Whitman was away at another station. I always thought Moran was not so game as he gave himself out to be. And I think if he'd had Whitman's steady eyes looking at him, and seeing a pistol in his hand, he wouldn't have shot as straight as he generally did when he was practising at a gum tree.

Anyhow, they laid it out all right, as they thought,

to take the place unawares. They'd been drinking at a flash kind of inn no great way off, and when they rode up to the house it seems they were all of 'em three sheets in the wind, and fit for any kind of villainy that came uppermost. As for Moran, he was a devil unchained. I know what he was. The people in the house that day trembled and shook when they heard the dogs bark and saw five strange horsemen ride through the back gate into the yard.

They'd have trembled a deal more if they'd known what was coming.

CHAPTER XI.

WHEN we found that by making darts and playing hide and seek with the police in this way we could ride about the country more comfortable like, we took matters easier. Once or twice we tried it on by night, and had a bit of a lark at Jonathan's, which was a change after having to keep dark so long. We'd rode up there after dark one night, and made ourselves pretty snug for the evening, when Bella Barnes asked us if we'd dropped across Moran and his mob that day.

"No," says I. "Didn't know they were about this part. Why, weren't they at Monckton's the day before yesterday?"

"Ah! but they came back last night, passed the house to-day going toward Mr. Whitman's, at Darjallook. I don't know, but I expect they're going to play up a bit there, because of his following them up that time the police nearly got Moran."

"What makes you think that? They're only going

for what they can get; perhaps the riding horses and any loose cash that's knocking about."

"Billy the Boy was here for a bit," says Maddie. "I don't like that young brat, he'll turn out bad, you take my word for it; but he said Moran knew Mr. Whitman was away at the Castlereagh station, and was going to make it a warning to them all."

"Well, it's too bad," said Bella; "there's no one there but Mrs. Whitman and the young ladies. It's real cowardly, I call it, to frighten a parcel of women. But that Moran's a brute and hasn't the feelings of a man about him."

"We must ride over, boys," says Starlight, yawning and stretching himself. "I was looking forward to a pleasant evening here, but it seems to me we ought to have a say in this matter. Whitman's gone a trifle fast, and been hard on us; but he's a gentleman, and goes straight for what he considers his duty. I don't blame him. If these fellows are half drunk they'll burn the place down I shouldn't wonder, and play hell's delight."

"And Miss Falkland's up there too, staying with the young ladies," says Maddie. "Why, Jim, what's up with you? I thought you wasn't taking notice."

"Come along, Dick," says Jim, quite hoarse-like, making one jump to the door. "Dash it, man, what's the use of us wasting time jawing here. By ——, if there's a hair of her head touched I'll break Moran's neck, and shoot the lot of them down like crows."

"Good bye, girls," I said, "there's no time to lose."

Starlight made a bow, polite to the last, and passed out. Jim was on his horse as we got to the stable door. Warrigal fetched Starlight's, and in half a minute Jim and he were off together along the road full split, and I

had as much as I could do to catch them up within the next mile. It wasn't twenty miles to Whitman's place, Darjallook, but the road was good, and we did it in an hour and twenty minutes, or thereabouts. I know Starlight lit a match and looked at his watch when we got near the front gate.

We could see nothing particular about the house. The lights shone out of the windows, and we heard the piano going.

"Seems all right," says Starlight. "Wonder if they came, after all? They'll think we want to stick the place up if we ride up to the hall door. Get off and look out tracks, Warrigal."

Warrigal dismounted, lit a couple of matches, and put his head down close to the soft turf, as if he was going to smell it.

"Where track?" says Starlight.

"There!" says Warrigal, pointing to something we couldn't see if we'd looked for a month. "Bin gone that way. That one track Moran's horse. I know him; turn foot in likeit cow. Four more track follow up."

"Why, they're in the house now, the infernal scoundrels," says Starlight. "You stay here with the horses, Warrigal; we'll walk up. If you hear shooting, tie them to the fence and run in."

We walked up very quiet to the house—we'd all been there before, and knew where the front parlour was—over the lawn and two flower-beds, and then up to the big bow-window. The others stood under an old white cedar-tree that shadowed all round. I looked in and, by George! my face burned, cold as it was. There was Moran lying back in an arm-chair, with a glass of grog in his hand, takin' it easy and makin' himself quite at

home. Burke and Daly were sitting in two chairs near the table, looking a long way from comfortable; but they had a couple of bottles of brandy on the table and glasses, and were filling up. So was Moran. They'd had quite as much as was good for them. The eldest Miss Whitman was sitting at the piano, playing away tune after tune, while her eyes were wandering about and her lips trembling, and every now and then she'd flush up all over her face; then she'd turn as white as a sheet, and look as if she'd fall off the stool. The youngest daughter was on her knees by her, on the other side, with her head in her lap. Every now and then I could hear a sob come from her, but stifled-like, as if she tried to choke it back as much as she could.

Burke and Daly had their pistols on the table, among the bottles—though what they wanted 'em there for I couldn't see—and Moran had stuck his on the back of the piano. That showed me he was close up drunk, for he was a man as never hardly let go of his revolver.

Mrs. Whitman was sitting crouched up in a chair behind her daughter, with a stony face, looking as if the end of the world was come. I hardly knew her again. She was a very kind woman, too; many a glass of grog she'd given me at shearing time, and medicine, too, once I was sick there with influenza.

But Miss Falkland; I couldn't keep my eyes off her. She was sitting on the sofa against the wall, quite upright, with her hands before her, and her eyes looking half proudly, half miserable, round the room. You couldn't hardly tell she was frightened except by a kind of twitching of her neck and shoulders.

Presently Moran, who was more than half boozed as

it was, and kept on drinking, calls out to Miss Whitman to sing a song.

"Come, Miss Polly," says he, "you can sing away fast enough for your dashed old father and some o' them swells from Bathurst. By George, you must tune your pipe a bit this time for Dan Moran."

The poor girl said she couldn't sing just then, but she'd play as much as he liked.

"Yer'd better sing now," he drawls out, "unless ye want me to come and make you. I know you girls wants coaxing sometimes."

Poor Miss Mary breaks out at once into some kind of a song—the pitifullest music ever you listened to. Only I wanted to wait a bit, so as to come in right once for all, I'd have gone at him, hammer and tongs, that very minute.

All this time Burke and Daly were goin' in steady at the brandy, finished one bottle and tackled another. They began to get noisy and talked a lot, and sung a kind of a chorus to Miss Mary's song.

After the song was over, Moran swore he'd have another one. She'd never sing for him any more, he said, unless she took a fancy to him, and went back to the Weddin Mountains with them.

"It ain't a bad name for a mountain, is it, miss?" says he, grinning. Then, fixing his black snake's eyes on her, he poured out about half a tumbler of brandy and drank it off.

"By gum!" he says, "I must have a dance; blest if I don't! First chop music—good room this—three gals and the missus—course we must. I'm regular shook on the polka. You play us a good 'un, Polly, or whatever yer name is. Dan Moran's goin' to enjoy himself this

night if he never sees another. Come on, Burke. Patsey, stand up, yer blamed fool. Here goes for my partner."

"Come, Moran," says Burke, "none of your larks; we're very jolly, and the young ladies ain't on for a hop; are ye, miss?" and he looked over at the youngest Miss Whitman, who stared at him for a moment, and then hid her face in her hands.

"Are you a-goin' to play as I told yer?" says Moran. "D'ye think yer know when yer well off?"

The tone of voice he said this in and the look seemed to frighten the poor girl so that she started an old-style polka there and then, which made him bang his heels on the floor and spin round as if he'd been at a dance-house. As soon as he'd done two or three turns he walks over to the sofa and sits down close to Miss Falkland, and put his arm round her waist.

"Come, Fanny Falkland," says he, "or whatever they call yer; you're so dashed proud yer won't speak to a bush cove at all. You can go home by'n by, and tell your father that you had a twirl-round with Dan Moran, and helped to make the evening pass pleasant at Darjalook afore it was burned."

Anything like the disgust, misery, and rage mixed up that came into Miss Falkland's face all in a moment and together-like, I never saw. She made no sound, but her face grew paler and paler; she turned white to the lips, as trembled and worked in spite of her. She struggled fierce and wild for nigh a solid minute to clear herself from him, while her beautiful eyes moved about like I've seen a wild animal's caught in a trap. Then, when she felt her strength wasn't no account against his, she gave one piercing, terrible scream, so long and un-

natural-like in the tone of it that it curdled my very blood.

I lifted up the window-sash quick, and jumped in; but before I made two steps Jim sprang past me, and raised his pistol.

"Drop her!" he shouts to Moran; "you hound! Leave go Miss Falkland, or by the living God I'll blow your head off, Dan Moran, before you can lift your hand! How dare you touch her, you cowardly dog!"

Moran was that stunned at seeing us show up so sudden that he was a good bit took off his guard, cool card as he was in a general way. Besides, he'd left his revolver on the piano close by the armchair, where his grog was. Burke and Daly were no better off. They found Starlight and Warrigal covering them with their pistols, so that they'd have been shot down before they could so much as reach for their tools.

But Jim couldn't wait; and just as Moran was rising on his feet, feeling for the revolver that wasn't in his belt (and that I never heard of his being without but that once), he jumps at him like a wallaroo, and, catching him by the collar and waistbelt, lifts him clean off his feet as if he'd been a child, and brings him agen the corner of the wall with all his full strength. I thought his brains was knocked out, dashed if I didn't. I heard Moran's head sound against the stone wall with a dull sort of thud; and on the floor he drops like a dead man—never made a kick. By George! we all thought he had killed him.

"Stash that, now," says Burke; "don't touch him again, Jim Marston. He's got as much as 'll do him for a bit; and I don't say it don't serve him right. I don't hold

with being rough to women. It ain't manly, and we've got wives and kids of our own."

"Then why the devil didn't you stop it?" says Starlight. "You deserve the same sauce, you and Daly, for sitting there like a couple of children, and letting that ruffian torment these helpless ladies. If you fellows go on sticking up on your own account, and I hear a whisper of your behaving yourselves like brutes, I'll turn policeman myself for the pleasure of running you in. Now, mind that, you and Daly, too. Where's Wall and Hulbert?"

"They went to yard the horses."

"That's fair game, and all in the day's work. I don't care what you take or whom you shoot for that matter, as long as it's all in fair fight; but I'll have none of this sort of work if I'm to be captain, and you're all sworn to obey me, mind that. I'll have to shoot a man yet, I see, as I've done before now, before I can get attended to. That brute's coming to. Lift him up, and clear out of this place as soon as you can. I'll wait behind."

They blundered out, taking Moran with them, who seemed quite stupid like, and staggered as he walked. He wasn't himself for a week after, and longer too, and threatened a bit, but he soon saw he'd no show, as all the fellows, even to his own mates, told him he deserved all he got.

Old Jim stood up by the fireplace after that, never stirring nor speaking, with his eyes fixed on Miss Falkland, who had got back her colour, and though she panted a bit and looked raised like, she wasn't much different from what we'd seen her before at the old place. The two Misses Whitman, poor girls, were standing up with their arms round one another's necks, and the tears running down their faces like rain. Mrs. Whitman was

lying back in her chair with her hands over her face cryin' to herself quiet and easy, and wringing her hands.

Then Starlight moved forward and bowed to the ladies as if he was just coming into a ball-room, like I saw him once at a swell ball they gave for the hospital at Turon.

"Permit me to apologize, Mrs. Whitman, and to you, my dear young ladies, for the rudeness of one of my men, whom I unhappily was not able to restrain. I have had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Whitman, and I hope you will express my regret that I was not in time to save you from the great annoyance to which you have been subjected."

"Oh! I shall be grateful all my life to you, and so, I'm sure, will Mr. Whitman, when he returns; and oh! Sir Ferdinand, if you and these two good young men, who, I suppose, are policemen in plain clothes, had not come in, goodness only knows what would have become of us."

"I am afraid you are labouring under some mistake, my dear madam. I have not the honour to be Sir Ferdinand Morringer or any other baronet at present; but I assure you I feel the compliment intensely. I am sure my good friends here, James and Richard Marston, do equally."

Here the Misses Whitman, in spite of all their terror and anxiety, were so tickled by the idea of their mother mistaking Starlight and the Marstons for Sir Ferdinand and his troopers that they began to laugh, not but what they were sober enough in another minute.

Miss Falkland got up then and walked forward, looking just the way her father used to do. She spoke to Starlight first.

"I have never seen you before, but I have often heard of you, Captain Starlight, if you will allow me to address you by that title. Believe me when I say that by your conduct to-night you have won our deepest gratitude—

more than that, our respect and regard. Whatever may be your future career, whatever the fate that your wild life may end in, always believe there are those who will think of you, pray for you, rejoice in your escapes, and sorrow sincerely for your doom. I can answer for myself, and I am sure for my cousins also."

Here the Misses Whitman said—

"Yes, indeed, we will—to our life's end."

Then she turned to Jim, who still stood there looking at her with his big gray eyes, that had got ever so much darker lately.

"You, poor old Jim," she said, and she took hold of his brown hand and held it in her own, "I am more sorry than I can tell to hear all I have done about you and Dick too. This is the second time you have saved me, and I am not the girl to forget it, if I could only show my gratitude. Is there any way?"

"There's Jeanie," just them two words he said.

"Your wife? Oh, yes, I heard about her," looking at him so kind and gentle-like. "I saw it all in the papers. She's in Melbourne, isn't she? What is her address?"

"Esplanade Hotel, St. Kilda," says Jim, taking a small bit of a letter out of his pocket.

"Very well, Jim, I have a friend who lives near it. She will find her out, and do all for her that can be done. But why don't you—why don't all of you contrive to get away somehow from this hateful life, and not bring ruin and destruction on the heads of all who love you? Say you will try for their sake—for my sake."

"It's too late, Miss Falkland," I said. "We're all thankful to you for the way you've spoken. Jim and I would be proud to shed our blood for you any time, or Mr. Falkland either. We'll do what we can, but we'll

have to fight it out to the end now, and take our chance of the bullet coming before the rope. Good-night, Miss Falkland, and good luck to you always."

She shook hands heartily with me and Jim, but when she came to Starlight he raised her hand quite respectful like and just touched it with his lips. Then he bowed low to them all and walked slowly out.

When we got to the public-house, which wasn't far off, we found that Moran and the other two had stayed there a bit till Wall and Hulbert came; then they had a drink all round and rode away. The publican said Moran was in an awful temper, and he was afraid he'd have shot somebody before the others got him started and clear of the place.

"It's a mercy you went over, Captain," says he; "there'd have been the devil to pay else. He swore he'd burn the place down before he went from here."

"He'll get caught one of these fine days," says Starlight. "There's more risk at one station than half-a-dozen road scrimmages, and that he'll find, clever as he thinks himself."

"Where's Mr. Whitman, Jack?" says I to the landlord (he wasn't a bad sort, old Jack Jones). "What made him leave his place to the mercy of the world, in a manner of speaking?"

"Well, it was this way. He heard that all the shepherds at the lower station had cut it to the diggings, ye see; so he thought he'd make a dart up to the Castle-reagh and rig'late the place a bit. He'll be back afore morning."

"How d'ye know that?"

"Well, he's ridin' that famous roan pony o' his, and he always comes back from the station in one day, though

he takes two to go; eighty-five miles every yard of it. It's a big day, but that pony's a rum un, and can jump his own height easy. He'll be welcome home to-night."

"I daresay he will, and no wonder. The missus must ha' been awful frightened, and the young ladies too. Good-night, Jack;" and we rattled off.

It wasn't so very late after all when we got back to Jonathan's; so, as the horses wanted a bit of a rest and a feed, we roused up the girls and had supper. A very jolly one it was, my word.

They were full of curiosity, you bet, to know how we got on when they heard Moran was there and the others. So bit by bit they picked it out of us. When they heard it all, Maddie got up and threw her arms round Jim's neck.

"I may kiss you now you're married," she says, "and I know there's only one woman in the world for you; but you deserve one from every woman in the country for smashing that wretch Moran. It's a pity you didn't break his neck. Never mind, old man; Miss Falkland won't forget you for that, you take my word. I'm proud of you, that I am."

Jim just sat there and let her talk to him. He smiled in a serious kind of way when she ran over to him first; but, instead of a good-looking girl, it might have been his grandmother for all he seemed to care.

"You're a regular old image, Jim," says she. "I hope none of my other friends 'll get married if it knocks all the go out of them, same as it has from you. However, you can stand up for a friend, can't you? You wouldn't see me trod upon; d'ye think you would, now? I'd stand up for you, I know, if you was bested anywhere."

"My dear Maddie," says Starlight, "James is in that

particular stage of infatuation when a man only sees one woman in the whole world. I envy him, I assure you. When your day comes you will understand much of what puzzles you at present."

"I suppose so," said Maddie, going back to her seat with a wondering, queer kind of look. "But it must be dreadful dull being shut in for weeks and weeks in one place, perhaps, and with only one man."

"I have heard it asserted," he says, "that a slight flavour of monotony occasionally assails the honeymoon. Variety is the salt of life, I begin to think. Some of these fine days, Maddie, we'll both get married and compare notes."

"You'll have to look out, then," says Bella. "All the girls about here are getting snapped up quick. There's such a lot of young bankers, Government officers, and swells of all sorts about the diggings now, not to reckon the golden-hole men, that we girls have double the pull we had before the gold. Why, there was my old school-mate, Clara Mason, was married last week to such a fine young chap, a surveyor. She'd only known him six weeks."

"Well, I'll come and dance at your wedding if you'll send me an invite," says Starlight.

"Will, you, though?" she said. "Wouldn't it be fun? Unless Sir Ferdinand was there. He's a great friend of mine, you know."

"I'll come if his Satanic Majesty himself was present (he occasionally does attend a wedding, I've heard), and bring you a present, too, Bella; mind, it's a bargain."

"There's my hand on it," says she. "I wonder how you'll manage it, but I'll leave that to you. It mightn't be so long either. And now it's time for us all to go to bed. Jim's asleep, I believe, this half hour."

CHAPTER XII.

THIS bit of a barney, of course, made bad blood betwixt us and Moran's mob, so for a spell Starlight and father thought it handier for us to go our own road and let them go theirs. We never could agree with chaps like them, and that was the long and short of it. They were a deal too rough and ready for Starlight; and as for Jim and me, though we were none too good, we couldn't do some of the things these coves was up to, nor stand by and see 'em done, which was more. This time we made up our mind to go back to the Hollow and drop out of notice altogether for a bit, and take a rest like.

We hadn't heard anything of Aileen and the old mother for weeks and weeks, so we fixed it that we should sneak over to Rocky Flat, one at a time, and see how things were going, and hearten 'em up a bit. When we did get to the Hollow, instead of being able to take it easy, as we expected, we found things had gone wrong as far as the devil could send 'em that way if he tried his best. It seems father had taken a restless fit himself, and after we were gone had crossed Nulla Mountain to some place above Rocky Flat, to where he could see what went on with a strong glass.

Before I go further I might as well tell you that, along with the whacking big reward that was offered for all of us, a good many coves as fancied themselves a bit had turned amateur policemen, and had all kinds of plans and dodges for catching us dead or alive. Now, men that take to the bush like us don't mind the regular paid force much, or bear them any malice. It's their duty to catch us or shoot us if we bolt, and ours to take

all sorts of good care that they shan't do either if we can help it.

Well, as I was sayin', we don't have it in for the regulars in the police; it's all fair pulling, "pull devil pull baker," someone has to get the worst of it. Now it's us, now it's them, that gets took or rubbed out, and no more about it.

But what us cross coves can't stand and are mostly sure to turn nasty on is the notion of fellows going into the man-hunting trade, with us for game, either for the fun of it or for the reward. That reward means the money paid for our blood. *We don't like it.* It may seem curious, but we don't; and them as take up the line as a game to make money or fun out of, when they've no call to, find out their mistake, sometimes when it's a deal too late.

Now we'd heard that a party of four men—some of them had been gaol warders and some hadn't—had made it up to follow us up and get us one way or the other if it was to be done. They weren't in the police, but they thought they knew quite as much as the police did; and, besides, the reward, £5,000, if they got our lot and anyone of the others, was no foolish money.

Well, nothing would knock it out of these chaps' heads but that we were safe to be grabbed in the long run trying to make into the old home. This was what made them gammon to be surveyors when they first came, as we heard about, and go measuring and tape-lining about, when there wasn't a child over eight years old on the whole creek that couldn't have told with half-an-eye they wasn't nothing of the sort.

Well, as bad luck would have it, just as father was getting down towards the place he meets Moran and

Daly, who were making over to the Fish River on a cattle-duffing lay of their own. They were pretty hard up; and Moran after his rough and tumble with Jim, in which he had come off second best, was ready for anything—anything that was bad, that is.

After he'd a long yarn with them about cattle and horses and what-not, he offered them a £10-note each if they'd do what he told them. Dad always carried money about with him; he said it came in handy. If the police didn't take him, they wouldn't get it; and if they did take him, why, nothing would matter much and it might go with the rest. It came in handy enough this time, anyhow, though it helped what had been far better left undone.

I remember what a blinded rage father got into when he first had Aileen's letter, and heard that these men were camped close to the old house, poking about there all day long, and worrying and frightening poor Aileen and mother.

Well, it seems on this particular day they'd been into the little township, and I suppose got an extra glass of grog. Anyhow, when they came back they began to be more venturesome than they generally were. One chap came into the house and began talking to Aileen, and after a bit mother goes into her bedroom, and Aileen comes out into the verandah and begins to wash some clothes in a tub, splashing the water pretty well about and making it a bit uncomfortable for anyone to come near her.

What must this fool do but begin to talk about what white arms she'd got—not that they were like that much, she'd done too much hard work lately to have her arms, or hands either, look very grand; and at last he began

to be saucy, telling her as no Marston girl ought to think so much of herself, considerin' who and what she was. Well, the end of it was father heard a scream, and he looked out from where he was hidden and saw Aileen running down the garden and the fellow after her. He jumps out, and fires his revolver slapbang at the chap; it didn't hit him, but it went that close that he stopped dead and turned round to see who it was.

"Ben Marston, by all that's lucky, boys!" says he, as two of the other chaps came running down at the shot. "We've got the ould sarpint out of his hole at last." With that they all fires at father as quick as they could draw; and Aileen gives one scream and starts running along the track up the hill that leads to George Storefield's place.

Father drops; one of the bullets had hit him, but not so bad as he couldn't run, so he ups again and starts running along the gully, with the whole four of them shouting and swearin' after him, making sure they got him to rights this time.

"Two hundred a man, boys," the big fellow in the lead says; "and maybe we'll take tay with the rest of 'em now."

They didn't know the man they were after, or they'd have just as soon have gone to "take tea," as they called it, with a tiger.

Father put on one of his old poacher dodges that he had borrowed from the lapwing in his own country, that he used to tell us about when we were boys (our wild duck 'll do just the same), and made himself out a deal worse than he was. Father could run a bit, too; he'd been fast for a mile when he was young, and though he was old now he never carried no flesh to signify, and

was as hard as nails. So what with knowing the ground, and they being flat-country men, he kept just out of pistol shot, and yet showed enough to keep 'em filled up with the notion that they'd run him down after a bit.

They fired a shot every now and then, thinking a chance one might wing him, but this only let Moran and Daly see that someone was after dad, and that the hunt was coming their way.

They held steady where they had been told to stop, and looked out for the men they'd been warned of by father. As he got near this place he kept lettin' 'em git a bit nearer and nearer to him, so as they'd follow him up just where he wanted. It gave them more chance of hitting him, but he didn't care about that, now his blood was up—not he. All he wanted was to get them. Dad was the coolest old cove, when shooting was going on, ever I see. You'd think he minded bullets no more than bottle-corks.

Well, he goes stumbling and dragging himself like up the gully, and they, cocksure of getting him, closing up and shooting quicker and quicker, when just as he jumps down the Black Gully steps a bullet did hit him in the shoulder under the right arm, and staggers him in good earnest. He'd just time to cut down the bank and turn to the left along the creek channel, throwing himself down on his face among the bushes, when the whole four of 'em jumps down the bank after him.

"Stand!" says Moran, and they looked up and saw him and Daly covering them with their revolvers. Before they'd time to draw, two of 'em rolls over as dead as door-nails.

The other two were dumbfounded and knocked all of a heap by suddenly finding themselves face to face

with the very men they'd been hunting after for weeks and weeks. They held up their pistols, but they didn't seem to have much notion of using them—particularly when they found father had rounded on 'em too, and was standing a bit away on the side looking very ugly and with his revolver held straight at 'em.

"Give in! Put down your irons," says Moran, "or by ——, we'll drop ye where ye stand."

"Come on," says one, and I think he intended to make a fight for it.

He'd 'a been better off if he had. It couldn't have been worse for him; but the other one didn't see a chance, and so he says—

"Give in, what's the good? There's three to two."

"All right," says the other chap, the big one; and they put down their pistols.

It was curious now as these two were both men that father and Moran had a down on. They'd better have fought it out as long as they could stand up. There's no good got by givin' in that I ever seen. Men as does so always drop in for it worse in the end.

First thing, then, they tied 'em with their hands behind 'em, and let 'em stand up near their mates that were down—dead enough, both of them, one shot through the heart and one through the head.

Then Moran sits down and has a smoke, and looks over at 'em.

"You don't remember me, Mr. Hagan?" says he, in his drawling way.

"No," says the poor chap, "I don't think I do."

"But I remember you devilish well," says Moran; "and so you'll find afore we leave this." Then he took another smoke. "Weren't you warder in Berrima gaol,"

says he, "about seven year ago? Ah! now we're coming to it. You don't remember getting Daniel Moran—a prisoner serving a long sentence there—seven days' solitary on bread and water for what you called disobedience of orders and insolence?"

"Yes, I do remember now. I'd forgotten your face. I was only doing my duty, and I hope you won't bear any malice."

"It was a little thing to you, maybe," says Moran; "but if you'd had to do seven long days and long cold nights in that devil's den, you'd 'a thought more about it. But you will now. My turn's come."

"I didn't do it to you more than to the rest. I had to keep order in the gaol, and devilish hard work it was."

"You're a liar," says Moran, striking him across the face with his clenched hand. "You had a down on me because I wouldn't knuckle down to you like some of them, and so you dropped it on to me every turn you could get. I was a youngster then, and might have grown into a man if I'd been let. But fellows like you are enough to turn any man into a devil if they've got him in their power."

"Well, I'm in your power now," says he. "Let's see how you'll shape."

"I don't like ye any the worse for being cheeky," says Moran, "and standing up to me, but it's too late. The last punishment I got, when I was kept in irons night and day for a month because I'd tried to get out, I swore I'd have your life if ever I came across ye."

"You'll never shoot me in cold blood," says the poor devil, beginning to look blue about the lips.

"I don't know what old Ben's going to do with the man he found chevyng his daughter," says Moran, look-

ing at him with his deadly black-snake eyes, "but I'm a-goin' to shoot you as soon as I've smoked out this pipe, so don't you make any mistake."

"I don't mind a shot or two," says Daly, "but I'm dashed if I can stand by and see men killed in cold blood. You coves have your own reasons, I suppose, but I shall hook it over to the Fish River. You know where to find me." And he walked away to where the horses were and rode off.

* * * * *

We got fresh horses and rode over quick to Rocky Flat. We took Warrigal with us, and followed our old track across Nulla Mountain till we got within a couple of miles of the place. Warrigal picked up the old mare's tracks, so we knew father had made over that way, and there was no call for us to lose time running his trail any longer. Better go straight on to the house and find out what had happened there. We sent Warrigal on ahead, and waited with our horses in our hands till he come back to us.

In about an hour he comes tearing back, with his eyes staring out of his head.

"I bin see old missis," he says. "She yabber that one make-believe constable bin there. Gammon-like it surveyor, and bimeby old man Ben gon' alonga hut, and that one pleeceman fire at him and all about, and him break back alonga gully."

"Any of 'em come back?" says Jim.

"Bale! me see um tent-dog tied up. Cake alonga fireplace, all burn to pieces. No come home last night. I b'lieve shot 'em old man longa gully."

"Come along, boys," says Starlight, jumping into his saddle. "The old man might have been hit. We must

run the tracks and see what's come of the governor. Four to one's big odds."

We skirted the hut and kept out wide till Warrigal cut the tracks, which he did easy enough. We couldn't see a blessed thing. Warrigal rode along with his head down, reading every tuft of grass, every little stone turned up, every foot of sand, like a book.

"Your old fader run likit Black Gully. Two fellow track here—bullet longa this one tree." Here he pointed to a scratch on the side of a box tree, in which the rough bark had been shivered. "Bimeby two fellow more come; 'nother one bullet; 'nother one here, too. This one blood drop longa white leaf."

Here he picked up a dried gum leaf, which had on the upper side a dark red spot, slightly irregular.

We had it all now. We came to a place where two horses had been tied to a tree. They had been stamping and pawing, as if they had been there a goodish while and had time to get pretty sick of it.

"That's near side one Moran's horse, pigeon-toes; me know 'em," says Warrigal. "Off side one Daly's roan horse, new shoes on. You see 'um hair, rub himself longa tree."

"What the blazes were they doing hereabouts?" says Starlight. "This begins to look complicated. Whatever the row was Daly and he were in it. There's no one rich enough to rob hereabouts, is there? I don't like the look of it. Ride on, boys."

We said nothing to each other, but rode along as fast as Warrigal could follow the line. The sky, which was bright enough when we started, clouded over, and in less than ten minutes the wind rose and rain began to pour down in buckets, with no end of thunder and

lightning. Then it got that cold we could hardly sit on our horses for trembling. The sky grew blacker and blacker. The wind began to whistle and cry till I could almost swear I heard someone singing out for help. Nulla Mountain was as black as your hat, and a kind of curious feeling crept over me, I hardly knew why, as if something was going to happen, I didn't know what. The old shepherd's words kept ringing in my ears like a lot of bells—"Woe and death, woe and death, woe and death."

I fully expected to find father dead; and, though he wasn't altogether a good father to us, we both felt bad at the notion of his lyin' there cold and stiff. I began to think of him as he used to be when we were boys, and when he wasn't so out and out hard—and had a kind word for poor mother and a kiss for little Aileen.

But if he were shot or taken, why hadn't these other men come back? We had just ridden by their tents, and they looked as if they'd just been left for a bit by men who were coming back at night. The dog was howling and looked hungry. Their blankets were all thrown about. Anyhow, there was a kettle on the fire, which was gone out; and more than that, there was the damper that Warrigal had seen lying in the ashes all burnt to a cinder.

Everything looked as if they'd gone off in a hurry, and never come back at night or since. One of their horses was tied with a tether rope close to the tent poles, and he'd been walking round and trampling down the grass, as if he'd been there all night. We couldn't make it out.

We rode on, hardly looking at one another, but following Warrigal, who rattled on now, hardly looking at the ground at all, like a dog with a burning scent. All

of a sudden he pulls up, and points to a dip into a cross gully, like an old river, which we all knew.

"You see um crow? I b'leeve longa Black Gully."

Sure enough, just above the drop down, where we used to gallop our ponies in old times and laugh to see 'em throw up their tails, there were half-a-dozen crows and a couple of eagle-hawks high up in the sky, wheeling and circling over the same place.

"By George! they've got the old man," says Jim. "Come on, Dick. I never thought poor old dad would be run down like this."

"Or he's got them!" says Starlight, curling his lip in a way he had. "I don't believe your old governor's dead till I see him. The devil himself couldn't grab him on his own ground."

CHAPTER XIII.

WE all pulled up at the side of the gully or dry creek, whatever it was, and jumped off our horses, leaving Warrigal to look after them, and ran down the rocky sides of it.

"Great God!" Starlight cries out, "what's that?" and he pointed to a small sloping bit of grass just underneath the bank. "Who are they? Can they be asleep?"

They were asleep, never to wake. As we stood side by side by the dead men, for there were four of them, we shook so, Jim and I, that we leaned against one another for support. We had never seen a sight before that like it. I never want to do so again.

There they lay, four dead men. We didn't know them ourselves, but guessed they were Hagan and his lot. How else did they come there? and how could dad

have shot them all by himself, and laid them out there? Were Daly and Moran with him? This looked like Moran's damnable work.

We looked and looked. I rubbed my eyes. Could it be real? The sky was dark, and the daylight going fast. The mountain hung over us black and dreadful looking. The wind whimpered up and down the hillside with a sort of cry in it. Everything was dark and dismal and almost unnatural looking.

All four men were lying on their backs side by side, with their eyes staring up to the sky—staring—staring! When we got close beside them we could see they had all been shot—one man through the head, the rest through the body. The two nearest to me had had their hands tied; the bit of rope was lying by one and his wrist was chafed.

One had been so close to the man that shot him that the powder had burnt his shirt. It wasn't for anything they had either, for every man's notes (and one had four fives and some ones) were pinned to them outside of their pockets, as if to show everyone that those who killed them wanted their blood and not their money.

"This is a terrible affair, boys," said Starlight; and his voice sounded strange and hoarse. "I never thought we should be mixed up with a deed like this. I see how it was done. They have been led into a trap. Your father has made 'em think they could catch him; and had Daly and Moran waiting for them—one on each side of this hole here. Warrigal"—for he had tied up his horse and crept up—"how many bin here?" Warrigal held up three fingers.

"That one ran down here—one after one. I see 'em boot. Moran stand here. Patsey Daly lie down behind

that ole log. All about boot-nail mark. Old man Ben he stand here. Dog bite'm this one."

Here he stooped and touched a dead man's ankle. Sure enough there was the mark of Crib's teeth, with the front one missing, that had been kicked down his throat by a wild mare.

"Two fellow tumble down fust-like; then two fellow bimeby. One—two—three fellow track go along a flat that way. Then that one get two horses and ridem likit Fish River. Penty blood tumble down here."

This was the ciphering up of the whole thing. It was clear enough now. Moran and Daly had waited for them here, and had shot down the two first men. Of the others, it was hard to say whether they died in fair fight or had been taken prisoners and shot afterwards. Either way it was bad enough. What a noise it would make! The idea of four men, well known to the Government, and engaged in hunting down outlaws, on whose head a price was set, to be deliberately shot—murdered in cold blood, as there was some ground for thinking to be the case. What would be the end of it all?

We had done things that were bad enough, but a deliberate, cold-blooded, shameful piece of bloodshed like this had never been heard of in New South Wales before.

There was nothing more to be done. We couldn't stay any longer looking at the dead men; it was no use burying them, even if we'd had the time. We hadn't done it, though we should be sure to be mixed up with it somehow.

"We must be moving, lads," said Starlight. "As soon as this gets wind there'll be another rush out this way, and every policeman and newspaper reporter in the

country will be up at Black Gully. When they're found everybody will see that they've been killed for vengeance and not for plunder. But the sooner they're found the better."

"Best send word to Billy the Boy," I said; "he'll manage to lay them on without hurting himself."

"All right. Warrigal knows a way of communicating with him; I'll send him off at once. And now the sooner we're at the Hollow the better for everybody."

We rode all night. Anything was better than stopping still with such thoughts as we were likely to have for companions. About daylight we got to the Hollow. Not far from the cave we found father's old mare with the saddle on and the reins trailing on the ground. There was a lot of blood on the saddle, too, and the reins were smeared all about with it; red they were to the buckles, so was her mane.

We knew then something was wrong, and that the old man was hard hit, or he'd never have let her go loose like that. When we got to the cave the dog came out to meet us, and then walked back whining in a queer way towards the log at the mouth, where we used to sit in the evenings.

There was father, sure enough, lying on his face in a pool of blood, and to all appearances as dead as the men we'd just left.

We lifted him up, and Starlight looked close and careful at him by the light of the dawn, that was just showing up over the tree tops to the east.

"He's not dead; I can feel his heart beat," he said. "Carry him in, boys, and we'll soon see what's the matter with him."

We took his waistcoat and shirt off—a coat he never

wore unless it was raining. Hard work we had to do it, they was so stuck to his skin when the blood had dried.

"By gum! he's been hit bad enough," says Jim. "Look here, and here, poor old dad!"

"There's not much 'poor' about it, Jim," says Starlight. "Men that play at bowls must expect to get rubbers. They've come off second best in this row, and I wish it had been different, for several reasons."

Dad was hit right through the top of the left shoulder. The ball had gone through the muscle and lodged somewhere. We couldn't see anything of it. Another bullet had gone right through him, as far as we could make out, under the breast in the right hand side.

"That looks like a good-bye shot," says Starlight; "see how the blood comes welling out still; but it hasn't touched the lungs. There's no blood on his lips, and his breathing is all right. What's this? Only through the muscle of the right arm. That's nothing; and this graze on the ribs, a mere scratch. Dash more water in his face, Jim. He's coming to."

After a few minutes he did come to, sure enough, and looked round when he found himself in bed.

"Where am I?" says he.

"You're at home," I said, "in the Hollow."

"Dashed if I ever thought I'd get here," he says. "I was that bad I nearly tumbled off the old mare miles away. She must have carried me in while I was unsensible. I don't remember nothing after we began to get down the track into the Hollow. Where is she?"

"Oh! we found her near the cave, with the saddle and bridle on."

"That's all right. Bring me a taste of grog, will ye;

I'm a'most dead with thirst. Where did I come from last, I wonder? Oh, I seem to know now. Settling accounts with that——dog that insulted my gal. Moran got square with t'other. That'll learn 'em to leave old Ben Marston alone when he's not meddling with them."

"Never mind talking about that now," I said. "You had a near shave of it, and it will take you all your time to pull through now."

"I wasn't hit bad till just as I was going to drop down into Black Gully," he said. "I stood one minute, and that cursed wretch Hagan had a steady shot at me. I had one at him afterwards, though, with his hands tied, too."

"God forgive you!" says Jim, "for shooting men in cold blood. I couldn't do it for all the gold in Turon, nor for no other reason. It'll bring us bad luck, too; see if it don't."

"You're too soft, Jim," says the old man. "You ain't a bad chap; but any young fellow of ten years old can buy and sell you. Where's that brandy and water?"

"Here it is," says Jim; "and then you lie down and take a sleep. You'll have to be quiet and obey orders now—that is if a few more years' life's any good to you."

The brandy and water fetched him to pretty well, but after that he began to talk, and we couldn't stop him. Towards night he got worse and worse and his head got hotter, and he kept on with all kinds of nonsense, screeching out that he was going to be hung and they were waiting to take him away, but if he could get the old mare he'd be all right; besides a lot of mixed-up things about cattle and horses that we didn't know the right of.

Starlight said he was delirious, and that if he hadn't

someone to nurse him he'd die as sure as fate. We couldn't be always staying with him, and didn't understand what was to be done much. We didn't like to let him lie there and die, so at long last we made up our minds to see if we could get Aileen over to nurse him for a few weeks.

Well, we scribbled a bit of a letter and sent Warrigal off with it. Wasn't it dangerous for him? Not a bit of it. He could go anywhere all over the whole country, and no trooper of them all could manage to put the bracelets on him. The way he'd work it would be to leave his horse a good way the other side of George Storefield's, and to make up as a regular blackfellow. He could do that first-rate, and talk their lingo, too, just like one of themselves. Gin or blackfellow, it was all the same to Warrigal. He could make himself as black as soot, and go bare-footed with a blanket or a 'possum rug round him and beg for siccapence, and nobody'd ever bowl him out. He took us in once at the diggings; Jim chucked him a shilling, and told him to go away and not come bothering near us.

So away Warrigal went, and we knew he'd get through somehow. He was one of those chaps that always does what they're told, and never comes back and says they can't do it, or they've lost their horse, or can't find the way, or they'd changed their mind, or something.

No; once he'd started there was no fear of him not scoring somehow or other. Whatever Starlight told him to do, day or night, foul weather or fair, afoot or on horseback, that thing was done if Warrigal was alive to do it.

What we'd written to Aileen was telling her that

father was that bad we hardly thought he'd pull through, and that if she wanted to save his life she must come to the Hollow and nurse him.

How to get her over was not the easiest thing in the world, but she could ride away on her old pony without anybody thinking but she was going to fetch up the cows, and then cut straight up the gully to the old yard in the scrub on Nulla Mountain. One of us would meet her there with a fresh horse and bring her safe into the Hollow. If all went well she would be there in the afternoon on a certain day; anyhow we'd be there to meet her, come or no come.

She wouldn't fail us, we were dead sure. She had suffered a lot by him and us, too; but, like most women, the very moment anything happened to any of us, even to dad, everything flew out of her head, except that we were sick or sorry and wanted her help. Help, of course; wasn't she willing to give that and her rest and comfort, health, even life itself, to wear herself out, hand and foot, for anyone of her own family?

So poor Aileen made her way up all alone to the old scrub stockyard. Jim and I had ridden up to it pretty early (he wouldn't stop behind) with a nice, well-bred little horse that had shone a bit at country races for her to ride on. We waited there a goodish while, we lying down and our horses hung up not far off for fear we might be "jumped" by the police at any time.

At last we sees the old pony's head coming bobbing along through the scrub along the worn-out cattle track, grown up as it was, and sure enough there was Aileen on him, with her grey riding skirt and an old felt hat on. She'd nothing with her; she was afraid to bring a ha'porth

of clothes or anything for fear they should any of 'em tumble that she was going a long way, and, perhaps, follow her up. So she had to hand that over to Warrigal, and trust to him to bring it on some way or other. We saw her before she saw us, and Jim gave a whistle just as he used to do when he was coming home late at night. She knew it at once, and a smile for a minute came over her pale face; such a sad sort of one it was, too, as if she was wondering at herself that she could feel that pleased at anything.

Whatever thoughts was in her mind, she roused up the old pony, and came towards us quick as soon as she catches sight of us. In two seconds Jim had lifted her down in his strong arms, and was holding her off the ground and hugging her as if she'd been a child. How the tears ran down her cheeks, though all the time she was kissing him with her arms round his neck; and me, too, when I came up, just as if we were boys and girls again.

After a bit she wiped her eyes, and said—

“How's father?”

“Very bad,” I said; “off his head, and raving. It'll be a close thing with him. Here's your horse now, and a good one, too. We must let the old pony go; he'll make home fast enough.”

She patted his neck and we turned him loose. He slued round and went away steady, picking a bit as he went. He'd be home next day easy enough, and nobody the wiser where he'd been to.

We'd brought a bit to eat and a glass of wine for the girl in case she was faint, but she wouldn't take anything but a crust of bread and a drink of water. There was a spring that ran all the year round near the cattle yard;

and off went we, old Lieutenant holding up his head and showing himself off. He didn't get such a rider on his back every day.

"What a dear horse," she said, as she pulled him together a bit like and settled herself fair and square in the saddle. "Oh, how I could enjoy all this if—if—Oh! my God, shall we ever know a moment's peace and happiness in this world again? Are we always to be sunk in wretchedness and misery as long as we live?"

We didn't lose much time after that, you be sure. Up and down, thick and open, rough or smooth, we made the pace good, and Aileen gave us all we knew to keep ahead of her. We had a good light when we got to the drop down into the Hollow. The sun was just setting, and if we'd had time or thought to give to the looks of things no doubt it was a grand sight.

All the Hollow was lighted up, and looked like a green sea with islands of trees in it. The rock towers on the other side of the range were shining and glittering like as if they were made of crystallized quartz or diamonds—red and white. There was a sort of mist creeping up the valley at the lower end under the mountain that began to soften the fire colours, and mix them up like. Even the mountain, that mostly looked black and dreary, frowning at our ways, was of purple and gold, with pale shadows of green and gray.

Aileen pulled up as we did, and jumped off our horses.

"So this is the Hollow," she said, half talking to herself, "that I've heard and thought so much about. What a lovely, lovely place! Surely it ought to have a different effect on the people that lived there."

"Better come off, Ailie, and lead your horse down

here," says Jim, "unless you want to ride down, like Starlight did, the first time we saw him."

"Starlight! is he here?" she said, in a surprised sort of way. "I never thought of that."

"Of course he is; where else should he be? Why don't you lead on, Dick?"

"Won't you get off? It's not altogether safe," I said, "though Lieutenant's all right on his old pins?"

"Safe!" she said, with a bitter sort of laugh. "What does it matter if a Marston girl does break her neck, or her heart either?"

She never said another word, but sat upright with a set face on her, as the old horse picked his way down after ours, and except when he put his foot on a rolling stone, never made a slip or a stumble all the way down, though it was like going down the side of a house.

When we got to the valley we put on a spurt to the cave, and found Warrigal sitting on the log in front of us. He'd got home first, of course, and there was Aileen's bundle, a biggish one, too, alongside of him. We could hear father raving and screaming out inside dreadful. Starlight wasn't nigh hand anywhere. He had walked off when Warrigal came home, and left him to watch the old man.

"He been like that all the time, Warrigal?"

"No! Captain say big one sleep. Him give him medicine like; then wake up and go on likit that. I believe him bad along a cobra."

Aileen had jumped off her horse and gone in to the old man the moment we came up and she heard his voice.

All that long night we could hear him talking to himself, groaning, cursing, shouting, arguing. It was wonderful how a man who talked so little as father could have

had so many thoughts in his mind. But then they all are boxed up together in every man's heart. At a time like this they come racing and tumbling out like a flock of sheep out of a yard when the hurdle's down. What a dashed queer thing human nature is when you come to think of it. That a man should be able to keep his tongue quiet, and shut the door on all the sounds and images and wishes that goes racing about inside of his mind like wild horses in a paddock!

One day he'll be smiling and sensible, looking so honest all the time. Next day a knock on the head or a little vein goes crack in the brain (as the doctor told me); then the rails are down, and everything comes out with a rush into the light of day—right and wrong, foul and fair, station brands, and clear skins, it don't make no difference.

Father was always one of the closest men that ever lived. He never told us much about his old life at home or after he came out here. Now he was letting drop things here and there that helped us to a few secrets he'd never told to no man. They made poor Aileen a bit more miserable than she'd been before, if that was possible; but it didn't matter much to us. We were pretty tired ourselves that night, and so we got Aileen all she wanted, and left her alone with him.

While we were away to meet her someone had taken the trouble to put up a bit of a partition, separating that part of the cave from the other; it was built up of stone—there was plenty about—and not so roughly done either. It made Aileen feel a lot more comfortable. Of course there was only one man who could have done it; and that was Starlight.

CHAPTER XIV.

TOWARDS morning father went into a heavy sleep; he didn't wake till the afternoon. Poor Aileen was able to get a doze and change her dress. After breakfast, while we were having a bit of a chat, in walks Starlight. He bowed to Aileen quite respectful, as he always did to a woman, and then shook hands with her.

"Welcome to the Hollow, Miss Marston," he said. "I can't say how charmed I am in one sense, though I regret the necessity which brought you here."

"I'm glad to come, and only for poor father's being so bad I could delight in the life here."

"How do you find your father?"

"He is asleep now, and perhaps the rest will do him good."

"He may awake free from fever," says Starlight. "I took the risk of giving him an opiate before you came, and I think the result has been favourable."

"Oh! I hope he will be better when he wakes," says Aileen, "and that I shall not have to watch through another dreadful night of raving. I can hardly bear it."

"You must make your brothers take their share; it's not fair to you."

"Thank you; but I feel as if I couldn't leave him to anybody but myself. He seems so weak now; a little neglect might kill him."

"Pardon me, Miss Marston; you overrate the danger. Depend upon it, your respected parent will be quite a different man in a week, though it may be a month or more before he is fully recovered. You don't know what a constitution he has."

"You have given me fresh hope," she said. "I feel

quite cheered up—that is” (and she sighed) “if I could be cheerful again about anything.”

Here she walked into the cave and sat down by father to watch till he awoke, and we all went out about our daily work, whatever it was—nothing very wonderful, I daresay, but it kept us from thinking.

Starlight was right. As luck would have it father woke up a deal better than when he laid down. The fever had gone away, his head was right again, and he began to ask for something to eat—leastways to drink, first. But Aileen wouldn't give him any of that, and very little to eat. Starlight had told her what to do in case he wanted what wasn't good for him, and as she was pretty middling obstinate, like himself, she took her own ways.

After this he began to get right; it wasn't easy to kill old dad. He seemed to be put together with wire and whipcord; not made of flesh and blood like other men. I don't wonder old England's done so much and gone so far with her soldiers and sailors if they was bred like him. It's my notion if they was caught young, kept well under command, and led by men they respected, a regiment or a man-of-war's crew like him would knock smoke out of any other thousand men the world could put up. More's the pity there ain't some better way of keeping 'em straight than there is.

He was weak for a bit—very weak; he'd lost a deal of blood; and, try how he would, he couldn't stand up long at a time, and had to give in and lie down in spite of himself. It fretted him a deal, of course; he'd never been on his back before, and he couldn't put up with it. Then his temper began to show again, and Aileen had a deal to bear and put up with.

We'd got a few books, and there was the papers, of course, so she used to read to him by the hour together. He was very fond of hearing about things, and, like a good many men that can't read and write, he was clever enough in his own way. When she'd done all the newspapers—they were old ones (we took care not to get any fresh ones, for fear she'd see about Hagan and the others)—she used to read about battles and sea-fights to him; he cared about them more than anything, and one night, after her reading to him about the Battle of Trafalgar, he turned round to her and says, "I ought to have been in that packet, Ailie, my girl. I was near going for a sailor once, on board a man-o'-war, too. I tried twice to get away to sea, that was before I'd snared my first hare, and something stopped me both times. Once I was fetched back and flogged, and pretty nigh starved. I never did no good afterwards. But it's came acrost me many and many a time that I'd been a different sort o' chap if I'd had my will then. I was allays fond o' work, and there couldn't be too much fightin' for me; so a man-o'-war in those days would have been just the thing to straighten me. That was the best chance I ever had. Well, I don't say as I haven't had others—plenty in this country, and good ones, too; but it was too late—I'd got set. When a man's young, that's the time he can be turned right way or wrong. It's none so easy afterwards."

He went to sleep then, and Aileen said that was the only time he ever spoke to her in that way. We never heard him talk like that, nor nobody else I expect.

If we could have got some things out of our heads, that was the pleasantest time ever we spent in the Hollow. After father could be left by himself for a few hours we got out the horses, and used to take Aileen out for long

rides all over the place, from one end to the other. It did her good, and we went to every hole and corner in it. She was never tired of looking at the great rock towers, as we used to call 'em, where the sandstone walls hung over, just like the pictures of castles, till, Starlight said, in the evenings you could fancy you saw flags waving and sentinels walking up and down on them.

One afternoon we went out to the place where the old hermit had lived and died. We walked over his old garden, and talked about the box we'd dug up, and all the rest of it. Starlight came with us, and he persuaded Aileen to ride Rainbow that day, and, my word, they made a splendid pair.

She'd dressed herself up that afternoon just a little bit more than common, poor thing, and put a bit of pink ribbon on and trimmed up her hat, and looked as if she began to see a little more interest in things. It didn't take much to make her look nice, particularly on horseback. Her habit fitted her out and out, and she had the sort of figure that, when a girl can ride well, and you see her swaying, graceful and easy-like, to every motion of a spirited horse, makes you think her handsomer than any woman can look on the ground. We rode pretty fast always, and it brought a bit of colour to her face. The old horse got pulling and prancing a bit, though he was that fine-tempered he'd carry a child almost, and Jim and I thought we hadn't seen her look like herself before this for years past.

It was a beautiful warm evening, though summer was over, and we were getting into the cold nights and sharp mornings again, just before the regular winter weather. There was going to be a change, and there were a few clouds coming up from the north-west; but for all that it

had been quite like a spring day. The turf on all the flats in the Hollow was splendid and sound. The grass had never been cut up with too heavy stocking (which ruins half the country, I believe), and there was a good thick undergrowth underneath. We had two or three little creeks to cross, and they were pretty full, except at the crossing places, and rippled over the stones and sparkled in the sun like the brooks we'd heard tell of in the old country. Everything was so quiet, and bright and happy-looking that we could hardly fancy we were the men we were; and that all this wild work had been going on outside of the valley that looked so peaceful and innocent.

There was Starlight riding alongside of Aileen on his second-best horse, and he was no commoner either (though he didn't come up to Rainbow, nor no other horse I ever saw), talking away in his pleasant, easy-going way. You'd think he hadn't got a thing to trouble him in the world. She, for a wonder, was smiling, and seemed to be enjoying herself for once in a way, with the old horse arching his neck, and spinning along under her as light as a greyhound, and as smooth as oil. It was something like a pleasant ride. I never forgot that evening, and I never shall.

We rode up to the ruined hut of the solitary man who had lived there so long, and watched the sun go down so often behind the rock towers from his seat under the big peach tree.

"What a wonderful thing to think of!" Aileen says, as she slipped down off her side-saddle.

We dismounted, too, and hung up our horses.

"Only to think that he was living here before we were born, or father came to Rocky Flat. Oh! if we could

have come here when we were little how we should have enjoyed it! It would have seemed fairyland to us."

"It always astonishes me," said Starlight, "how any human being can consent to live, year after year, the same life in the same place. I should go mad half a dozen times over. Change and adventure are the very breath of my nostrils."

"He had the memory of his dead wife to keep him," said Aileen. "Her spirit soothed the restless heart that would have wandered far into the wilds again."

"It may be so," said Starlight, dreamily. "I have known no such influences. An outlaw I, by forest laws, almost since the days of my boyhood, I shall be so till the day of my death," he added.

"If I were a man I should go everywhere," said Aileen, her eyes sparkling and her face regular lighted up. "I have never been anywhere or seen anything, hardly so much as a church, a soldier, a shop-window, or the sea, begging his pardon for putting him last. But oh! what a splendid thing to be rich; no, not that altogether, but to be able to go wherever you liked, and have enough not to be troubled about money."

"To be free, and have a mind at ease; it doesn't seem so much," said Starlight, talking almost to himself; "and yet how we fools and madmen shut ourselves out of it for ever, for ever, sometimes by a single act of folly, hardly crime. That comes after."

"The sun is going down behind the great rock tower," Aileen says, as if she hadn't heard him. Perhaps she didn't. When people have a lot on their minds they're half their time thinking their own thoughts. "How all the lovely colours are fading away. Life seems so much

like that—a little brightness, then grey twilight, night and darkness so soon after.”

“Now and then there’s a star; you must admit that, Miss Marston,” says he, cheerful and pleasant again; he was never down for long at a time. “And there’s that much-abused luminary, the moon; you’ll see her before we get home. We’re her sworn votaries and worshippers, you know.”

We had to ride a bit to get home with any kind of light, for we didn’t want father to be growling or kicking up a row with Warrigal that we left to look after him. But a few miles didn’t matter much on such a road, and with horses in such buckle as ours.

The stars came out after awhile, and the sky was that clear, without a cloud in it, that it was a better light to ride by than the moon throws. Jim and I sometimes rode on one side and sometimes the other; but there was old Rainbow always in the lead, playing with his bit and arching his neck, and going with Aileen’s light weight on him as if he could go on all night at the same pace and think nothing of it; and I believe he could.

When we got home dad was grumpy, and wondered what we wanted riding the horses about when there was nothing to do and nothing to see. But Warrigal had made him a pot of tea, and he was able to smoke now; so he wasn’t so bad after all. We made ourselves pretty comfortable—Aileen said she’d got a good appetite, for a wonder—and we sat chatting round the fire and talking away quite like old days till the moon was pretty high.

Father didn’t get well all at once. He went back twice because he would try to do too much, and wouldn’t be said by Starlight or Aileen either when he took a thing into his head; then he’d have to be nursed and looked

after day and night again just the same as ever. So it took near a month before he was regularly on his pins again, and going about as he did before he was hit. His right arm was a bit stiff, too; it used to pain and make him swear awful now and again. Anyhow, Aileen made us that comfortable and happy while she was there we didn't care how long he took getting well.

Those were out and out the pleasantest days we ever spent in the Hollow—the best time almost Jim and I had had since we were boys. Nearly ever day we rode out in the afternoon, and there wasn't a hole or corner, a spring or a creek inside the walls of the old Hollow that we didn't show Aileen. She was that sort of girl she took an interest in everything; she began to know all the horses and cattle as well as we did ourselves. Rainbow was regular given up to her, and the old horse after a bit knew her as well as his master. I never seen a decent horse that didn't like to have a woman on his back; that is if she was young and lissom and could ride a bit. They seem to know, in a sort of way. I've seen horses that were no chop for a man to ride, and that wouldn't be particular about bucking you off if the least thing started them, but went as quiet as mice with a girl on their backs.

So Aileen used to make Rainbow walk and amble his best, so that all the rest of us, when she did it for fun, had to jog. Then she'd jump him over logs or the little trickling deep creeks that ran down to the main water; or she'd pretend to have a race and go off full gallop, riding him at his best for a quarter of a mile; then he'd pull up as easy as if he'd never gone out of a walk.

"How strange all this is," she said one day; "I feel

as if I were living on an island. It's quite like playing at 'Robinson Crusoe,' only there's no sea. We don't seem to be able to get out all the same. It's a happy, peaceful life, too. Why can't we keep on for ever like this, and shut out the wicked, sorrowful world altogether?"

"Quite of your opinion, Miss Marston; why should we ever change?" says Starlight, who was sitting down with the rest of us by the side of our biggest river. We had been fishing all the afternoon and done well. "Let us go home no more; I am quite contented. But what about poor Jim? He looks sadder every day."

"He is fretting for his wife, poor fellow, and I don't wonder. You are one of those natures that never change, Jim; and if you don't get away soon or see some chance of rejoining her you will die. How you are to do it I don't know."

"I am bound to make a try next month," says Jim. "If I don't do something towards it I shall go mad."

"You could not do a wiser thing," says Starlight, "in one way, or more foolish thing in another. Meantime, why should we not make the best of the pleasant surroundings with which nature provides us here—green turf, sparkling water, good sport, and how bright a day! Could we be more favoured by Fortune, slippery dame that she is? It is an Australian Decameron without the naughty stories."

"Do you know, sometimes I really think I am enjoying myself," said Aileen, half to herself, "and then I feel that it must be a dream. Such dreadful things are waiting for me—for us all." Then she shuddered and trembled.

She did not know the most dreadful thing of all yet,

We had carefully kept it from her. We chanced its not reaching her ears until after she had got home safe and had time to grieve over it all by herself.

We had a kind of feeling somehow that us four might never meet again in the same way, or be able to enjoy one another's company for a month, without fear of interruption again, as long as we lived.

So we all made up our minds, in spite of the shadow of evil that would crawl up now and then to enjoy each other's company while it lasted, and make the best of it.

Starlight for all that seemed altered like, and every now and then he'd go off with Warrigal and stay away from daylight to dark. When he did come he'd sit for hours with his hands before him and never say a word to anyone. I saw Aileen watch him when he looked like that, not that she ever said anything, but pretended to take it as a matter of course.

Other times he'd be just as much the other way. He'd read to her, and he had a good many books, poetry, and all kind of things stowed away in the part of the cave he called his own. And he'd talk about other countries that he'd been in, and the strange people he'd seen, by the hour together, while she would sit listening and looking at him, hardly saying a thing, and regular bound up in his words. And he could talk once he was set agoing. I never saw a man that could come up to him.

Aileen wasn't one of those sort of girls that took a fancy to any good-looking sort of fellow that came across her. Quite the other way. She seemed to think so little about it that Jim and I always used to say she'd be an old maid, and never marry at all. And she used to say she didn't think she ever would. She never seemed to

trouble her head about the thing at all, but I always knew that if ever she did set her fancy upon a man, and take a liking to him, it would not be for a year or two, but for ever. Though she'd mother's good heart and softness about her, she'd a dash of dad's obstinacy in her blood, and once she made up her mind about anything she wasn't easy turned.

Jim and I could see clear enough that she was taking to Starlight; but then so many women had done that, had fallen in love with him and had to fall out again—as far as we could see. He used to treat them all alike—very kind and respectful, but like a lot of children. What was the use of a wife to him? “No,” he said, once or twice, “I can bear my fate, because my blood does not run in the veins of a living soul in Australia. If it were otherwise I could not bear my reflections. As it is, the revolver has more than once nearly been asked to do me last service.”

Though both Aileen and he seemed to like each other, Jim and I never thought there was anything in it, and let them talk and ride and walk together just as they pleased. Aileen always had a good word for Starlight, and seemed to pity him so for having to lead such a life, and because he said he had no hope of ever getting free from it. Then, of course, there was a mystery about him. Nobody knew who he'd been, or almost where he had come from—next to nothing about him had ever come out. He was an Englishman—that was certain—but he must have come young to the colony. No one could look at him for a moment and see his pale, proud face, his dark eyes—half-scornful, half-gloomy, except when he was set up a bit (and then you didn't like to look at them at all)—without seeing that he was a gen-

tleman to the tips of his delicate-looking fingers, no matter what he'd done, or where he'd been.

He was rather over the middle-size; because he was slight made, he always looked rather tall than not. He was tremendous strong, too, though he didn't look that, and as active as a cat, though he moved as if walking was too much trouble altogether, and running not to be thought of.

We didn't expect it would do either of 'em much good. How could it, even if they did fall in love with one another and make it up to get married? But they were both able to take care of themselves, and it was no use interfering with 'em either. They weren't that sort.

Starlight had plenty of money, besides his share of the gold. If we could ever get away from this confounded rock-walled prison, good as it was in some ways; and if he and Aileen and the rest of us could make a clean dart of it and get to America, we could live there free and happy yet, in spite of all that had come and gone.

Aileen wasn't like to leave poor old mother as long as she wanted her, so it couldn't come off for a year or two at earliest, and many things were sure to happen in the meanwhile. So we let all the talking and walking and riding out in the evening go on as much as they pleased, and never said anything or seemed to take any notice at all about it.

All this time mother was at George Storefield's. When Aileen ran over that time, he said it wasn't fit for them to live at Rocky flat by themselves. So he went over that very day—like a good fellow, as he was—and brought over the old woman, and made them both stay at his house, safe and comfortable. When Aileen said

she had to go away to nurse dad he said he would take care of mother till she came back, and so she'd been there all the time. She knew Mrs. Storefield (George's mother) well in the old times; so they used to sit by the kitchen fire when they wanted to be extra-comfortable, and knit stockings and talk over the good old times to their hearts' content.

If it hadn't been for old Mrs. Storefield I don't expect mother would have contented herself there—the cottage was got so grand, Aileen told us, and Gracey had to dress a bit now. George had kept on making more money in every way he tried it, and of course he began, bit by bit, to live according to his means.

He'd bought cattle-stations on the Lachlan just when the gold broke out first, and everybody thought station property was never going to be worth nothing again. Now, since cattle had risen and meat and all to such a price, he was making money hand over fist. More than that, as I said before, he'd been made a magistrate, and all the swells began to take notice of him—not altogether because he'd made money either; what I call the real swells, as far as I see, won't do that. If they don't care for a man—no matter how much money he's made—they hold shy of him. But if he's a straight-going, good sort of fellow, that has his head screwed on the right way, and don't push himself forward too much, they'll meet him half-way, and a very good thing too.

We could see George was going upwards and out of our lot, beginning to mix with different people and get different notions—not but what he was always kind and friendly in his way to Aileen and mother, and would have been to us if he'd ever seen us. But all his new friends were different kind of people, and after a bit,

Aileen said, we'd only be remembered as people he'd known when he was young, and soon, when the old lady died, we'd be asked into the kitchen and not into the parlour. Aileen used to laugh when she talked like this, and say she'd come and see George when he'd married a lady, and what fun it would be to remind Gracey of the time they threshed the oats out together at Rocky Flat. But still, laugh and all, I could see, though she talked that way, it made her feel wretched all the while, because she couldn't help thinking that we ought to have done just as well as George, and might have been nigh-hand as far forward if we'd kept straight. If we'd only kept straight! Ah, there was where the whole mistake laid.

It often seems to me as if men and women ought to have two lives—an old one and a new one—one to repent of the other; the first one to show men what they ought to keep clear of in the second. When you think how foolish-like and childish man or woman commits their first fault, not so bad in itself, but enough often to shut them out from nearly all their chances of good in this world, it does seem hardish that one life should end all under the sun. Of course, there's the other, and we don't know what's coming, but there's so many different notions about that a chap like me gets puzzled, and looks on it as out of his line altogether.

We weren't sorry to have a little excuse to stop quiet at home for this month. We couldn't have done no good by mooching about, and ten to one, while the chase was so hot after all that were supposed to have had a hand in rubbing out Hagan and his lot, we should have been dropped upon. The whole country was alive with scouting parties, as well as the regulars. You'd have thought

the end of the world was come. Father couldn't have done a better thing for himself and all of us than get hit as he did. It kept him and us out of harm's way, and put them off the scent, while they hunted Moran and Burke and the rest of their lot for their lives. They could hardly get a bit of damper out of a shepherd's hut without it being known to the police, and many a time they got off by the skin of their teeth.

CHAPTER XV.

AT last father got well, and said he didn't see what good Aileen could do stopping any longer in the Hollow, unless she meant to follow up bushranging for a living. She'd better go back and stay along with her mother. If George Storefield liked to have 'em there, well and good; things looked as if it wasn't safe now for a man's wife and daughter, and if he'd got into trouble, to live peaceable and quiet in their own house. He didn't think they need be afraid of anyone interfering with them for the future, though. Here dad looked so dark that Aileen began to think he was going to be ill again. We'd all start and go a bit of the way with her next day—to the old stock-yard or a bit further; she could ride from there, and take the horse back with her and keep him if she liked.

"You've been a good gal to me," he says to her; "you always was one; and your mother's been a good woman and a good wife; tell her I said so. I'd no call to have done the things I have, or left home because it wasn't tidy and clean and a welcome always when I came back. It's been rough on her, and on you, too, my gal;

and if it'll do her any good, tell her I'm dashed sorry. You can take this trifle of money. You needn't boggle at it; it's honest got and earned, long before this other racket. Now you can go. Kiss your old dad; like as not you won't see him again."

We'd got the horses in. I lifted her up on to the saddle, and she rode out. Her horse was all on the square, so there was no harm in her taking him back with her, and off we went. Dad didn't go after all. We took it easy out to the old stock-yard. We meant to camp there for half-an-hour, and then to send her on, with Warrigal to keep with her and show her the way home.

We didn't want to make the time too short. What a lovely day it was! The mountain sides were clogged up with mist for an hour after we started; still, anyone that knew the climate would have said it was going to be a fine day. There wasn't a breath of air; everything was that still that not a leaf on any of the trees so much as stirred.

When we came to the pass out of the valley, we none of us got off; it was better going up than coming down, and it would have tired Aileen out at the start to walk up. So the horses had to do their climbing. It didn't matter much to them. We were all used to it, horses and riders. Jim and I went first, then Warrigal, then Aileen and Starlight. After we got up to the top we all stopped and halted a bit to look round.

Just then, as if he'd waited for us, the sun came out from behind the mountain; the mists lifted and rolled away as if they had been grey curtains. Everything showed clear out like a playhouse, the same Jim and I used to see in Melbourne. From where we stood you could see everything, the green valley flats with the big old trees

in clumps, some of 'em just the same as they'd been planted. The two little river-like silver threads winding away among the trees, and far on the opposite side the tall gray rock-towers shining among the forest edges of the high green wall. Somehow the sun wasn't risen enough to light up the mountain. It looked as black and dismal as if it was nightfall coming on.

"Good-bye, old Hollow!" Aileen called out, waving her hand. "Everything looks bright and beautiful except the mountain. How gloomy it appears, as if it held some dreadful secret—doesn't it? Ah! what a pleasant time it has been for me. Am I the same Aileen Marston that went in there a few weeks since? And now I suppose there will be more misery and anxiety waiting for all of us when I get back. Well, come what will, I have had a little happiness on this earth. In heaven there must be rest."

We all rode on, but none of us seemed to care to say much. Every step we went seemed to be taking us away from the place where we'd all been so happy together. The next change was sure to be for the worse. What it would be, or when it would come, we none of us could tell.

Starlight and Aileen rode together most of the way, and talked a good deal, we could see. Before we got to the stock-yard she rode over to Jim and cheered him up as much as she could about Jeanie. She said she'd write to her, and tell her all about him, and how happy we'd all been together lately; and tell her that Jim would find some way to get down to her this spring, if he could manage it any road.

"If I'm above ground, tell her I'll be with her," says poor old Jim, "before Christmas. If she don't see me

then I'll be dead, and she may put on black and make sure she's a widow."

"Oh, come, you mustn't talk like that, Jim, and look to the bright side a bit. There's a good chance yet, now the country's so full of diggers and foreigners. You try your luck, and you'll see your wife yet."

Then she came to me, and talked away just like old times.

"You're the eldest, Dick," she said, "and so it's proper for me to say what I'm going to say." Then she told me all that was in her heart about Starlight. He and she had made it up that if he could get away to a foreign country she would join him there, and take mother with her. There was to be no marrying or love-making unless they could carry out that plan. Then she told me that she had always had the same sort of feeling towards him. "When I saw him first I thought I had never seen a man before—never one that I could care for or think of marrying. And now he has told me that he loves me—loves me, a poor ignorant girl that I am; and I will wait for him all my life, and follow him all round the world. I feel as if I could die for him, or wear out my life in trying to make him happy. And yet, and yet," she said, and all her face grew sad, and put on the old look that I knew so well, so hopeless, so full of quiet bearing of pain, "I have a kind of feeling at my heart that it will never be. Something will happen to me or to him. We are all doomed to sorrow and misfortune, and nothing can save us from our fate."

"Aileen, dear," I said, "you are old enough to know what's best for yourself. I didn't think Starlight was on for marrying any woman, but he's far and away the best man we've ever known, so you can please yourself. But

you know what the chances are. If he gets clear off, or any of us, after what's been done, you're right. But it's a hundred to one against it."

"I'll take the odds," says she, holding up her head. "I'm willing to put my life and happiness, what little there's left of it, on the wager. Things can't well be worse."

"I don't know," I said. "I ought to tell you—I must tell you something before we part, though I'd a deal rather not. But you'll bear it better now than in a surprise."

"Not more blood, more wickedness," she said, in a half-whisper, and then she looks up stern and angry-like. "When is this list of horrible things to stop?"

"It was none of our doing. Moran and Daly were in it, and—"

"And none of you? Swear that," she said, so quick and pitiful-like.

"None of us," I said again; "nor yet Warrigal."

"Then who did it? Tell me all. I'm not a child. I will know."

"You remember the man that was rude to you at Rocky Flat, and father and he fired at one another?"

"Of course I do, cowardly wretch that he was. Then Moran was waiting for them up the gully? I wondered that they did not come back next day."

"They never came back," I said.

"Why, you don't mean to tell me that they are all dead, all four?—those strong men! Oh, surely not, Dick?" and she caught hold of my arm, and looked up into my face.

"Yes, Aileen, all. We came after and followed up dad, when we got home; it's a wonder he did it by himself. But we saw them all four lying stretched out."

She put down her head and never spoke more till we parted.

* * * * *

We turned back, miserable enough all of us, God knows. After having Aileen to make the place bright and pleasant and cheer us all up losing her was just as if all the little pleasure we had in our lives was dropped out of them—like the sun going out of the sky, and the wind rising; like the moon clouding over, and a fog burying up everything—dark and damp, the same as we'd had it many a time cattle-driving by night. We hardly spoke a word to one another all the way home, and no wonder.

Next day we all sat about, looking more down on our luck, dad said, than any day since we'd "turned out." Then Starlight told him about him and Aileen, how they'd made it up to be married some day or other. Not yet, of course; but if he could get away by Melbourne to some of these places—the islands on the Pacific coast, where vessels were always sailing for—he didn't see why his luck shouldn't change. "I have always thought your daughter," he says to father, "one of the grandest women I ever met, in any degree, gentle or simple. She has had the imprudence to care for me; so, unless you have some well-grounded objection—and I don't say you haven't, mind you, I should if I were in your place—you may as well say you're contented, and wish us luck!"

Father was a long time before he said anything. He sat there, looking very sullen and set-like, while Starlight lit a cigar and walked quietly up and down a few paces off.

Dad answers at last. "I don't say but what other

lads would have suited better if they'd come off, but most things goes contrary in this world. The only thing as I'm doubtful of, Captain, is your luck. If that's bad, all the trying and crying won't set it right. And it's great odds as you'll be caught or shot afore the year's out. For that matter, every one of us is working for Government on the same road. But the gal's a good gal, and if she's set her fancy on you I won't block her. You're a pair of dashed fools, that's all, botherin' your heads with the like at a time like this, when you boys are all more likely to have a rope round your necks than any gal's arms, good or bad. Have your own way. You always managed to get it, somehow or other, ever since I knowed ye."

After this father lit his pipe and went into the cave.

By-and-bye he comes out again and catches the old mare.

"I ain't been out of this blessed hole," he says, "for a month of Sundays. I'm dead tired of seeing nothin' and doin' nothin'. I'll crawl over to old Davy's for our letters and papers. We ain't heard nothing for a year, seems to me."

Dad was strong enough to get about in the saddle again, and we weren't sorry to get shut of him for a bit. He was that cranky at times there was no living with him. As for ourselves, we were regular wild for some sort of get away for a bit of a change; so we hadn't talked it over very long before we made up our minds to take a run over to Jonathan Barnes's and have a bit of fun, just to take the taste out of our mouths of Aileen's going away.

We had to dress ourselves very quiet and get fresh horses—nags that had nothing particular about them to

make people look, at the same time with a bit of go in them in case we were pushed at any time.

No sooner said than done. We went to work and got everything ready, and by three o'clock we were off—all three of us, and never in better heart in our lives—for a bit of fun or devilment; it didn't matter which came first.

When we got to Jonathan's it was latish, but that didn't matter to us or to the girls neither; they were always ready for a bit of fun, night or day. However, just at first they pretended to be rather high and mighty about this business of Hagan's.

"Oh! it's you, is it?" says Bella, after we walked in. "I don't know as it's safe for us to be knowing such dangerous characters. There's a new law against harbouring, father says. He's pretty frightened, I can tell you, and for two pins we'd be told to shut the door in your faces."

"You can do that if you like now," says I; "we shan't want telling twice, I daresay. But what makes you so stiff to-night?"

"Why, Hagan's business, of course," says Maddie; "four men killed in cold blood. Only I know you couldn't and wouldn't be in it I'd not know any of ye from a crow. There now."

"Quite right, most beauteous Madeline," says Starlight; "it was a very dreadful affair, though I believe there was some reason for old Ben being angry. Of course, you know we weren't within miles of the place when it was done. You remember the night we were here last?"

"Of course we do, Captain, quite well. Weren't you

going to dance at Bella's wedding and all? You'll have to do that sooner than we expected, though."

"Glad to hear it, but listen to me, my dear; I want you to know the truth. We rode straight back to the—to where we lived—and, of course, found the old man gone away from the place. We tracked him right enough, but came up when it was all over. Daly and Moran were the chief actors in that tragedy."

"Oh, we said it was Moran's work from the first, didn't we, Bill? It's just the line he's cut out for. I always think he ought to have a bowl and dagger. He looks like the villain on the stage."

"On or off the stage he can support the principal part in that line most naturally," says Starlight; "but I prophesy he will be cut off in the midst of his glorious career. He's beastly cunning, but he'll be trapped yet."

"It's a pity Jim can't stay a few days with us," says Maddie; "I believe we'd find a way of passing him on to Victoria. I've known more than one or two, or half-a-dozen, either, that has been put through the same way."

"For God's sake, Mad, lay me on!" says poor Jim, "and I'll go on my knees to you."

"Oh! I daresay," says Maddie, looking saucy, "but I like a man to be fond of some woman in a proper way, even if it isn't me; so I'll do what I can to help you to your wife and pickaninny."

"We must get you into the police force, Maddie," says Starlight, "or make you a sort of Inspector, unattached, if you're so clever at managing these little affairs. But what's the idea?"

"Well," says she, settling herself in a chair, spreading out her dress, and looking very knowing, "there's an old gentleman being driven all the way overland in a

sort of light Yankee trap, and the young fellow that's driving has to find horses and feed 'em, and get so much for the trip."

"Who is it?" says I.

"Oh! you know him," says Maddie, looking down, "he's a great friend of mine, a steady-going, good-conducted chap, and he's a little—you understand—well, shook on me. I could persuade him a bit, that is—"

"I don't doubt that at all," says I.

"Oh! you know him a little. He says he saw you at the Turon; he was working with some Americans. His name's Joe Moreton."

"I remember him well enough; he used to wear a moustache and a chin beard, and talk Yankee. Only for that he was a good deal like Jim; we always said so."

"Do you see anything now, Dick, you that's so sharp?" says Maddie.

"Bless my soul," says Starlight, "of course, it is as clear as your beautiful eyes. Jim is to shave his beard, talk like a Yankee, and go in Joe Moreton's place. I see it all. Maddie persuading Joe to consent to the exchange of duties."

"But what will his employer say?"

"Oh! he's as bad as bad can be with the sandy blight," says Maddie, "wears green goggles, poor old gentleman. He'll never know nothing, and he'll be able to swear up for Jim if the police pull him anywhere this side of the Murray."

We'd told Maddie that money needn't stand in the way, so she was to promise Joe the full sum that he was to get for his contract would be paid to him in cash that night—Jim to pay his own expenses as he went, the same as he was to do himself. Of course she could get

the money from old Jonathan. A word from us then was worth a deal more than that'd come to. Money wasn't the worst thing we had to care about.

They would have to change clothes, and he'd tell Jim about the horses, the stages, and how to answer the old cove, and what to do to humour him as they went along. If he'd had his full eyesight he might have noticed some difference, but as it was, it was as much as the poor old chap, she believed, could see there was a driver at all. His eyes was bound up mostly; he had a big shade over 'em, and was half the night swabbing and poulticing, and putting lotion into 'em. He'd got sandy blight that bad it would take months to get right. Once you get a touch like that it's a terror, I can tell you. I've had it that bad myself I had to be led about.

After a lot of talking, that Jim was to try his luck as the Rev. Mr. Watson's coachman, he was mad to get away somehow, and such another chance might never turn up in a month of Sundays. He would have plenty of time to shave his beard and make himself look as like as ever he could to Joe Moreton. Maddie said she'd see after that, and it would be as good as a play. Lucky for old Jim we'd all taken a fancy at the Turon, for once in a way, to talk like Arizona Bill and his mates, just for the fun of the thing. There were so many Americans there at first, and they were such swells, with their silk sashes, bowie knives, and broad-leafed "full-share" hats, that lots of the young native fellows took a pride in copying them, and could walk and talk and guess and calculate wonderful well considering. Besides, most of the natives have a sort of slow, sleepy way of talking, so it partly came natural to this chap, Joe Moreton, and Jim. There couldn't be a better chance,

so we thought we'd stay a day and give Jim a send off all square and regular. It wasn't no ways too safe, but we wanted a bit of a jollification and we thought we'd chance it.

That night we had a regular good ball. The girls got some of the young fellows from round about to come over, and a couple or two other girls, and we had no end of fun. There was plenty of champagne, and even Jim picked up a bit; and what with being grateful to Maddie for giving him this lift, and better in spirits on the chance of seeing Jeanie again, he was more like his own self. Maddie said he looked so handsome she had half a mind to throw over Joe Moreton after all.

Joe came rather latish, and the old gentleman had a cup of tea and went to bed at once, leaving word for Joe that he wanted to start almost before daylight, or as soon as he could see to drive, so as to get half-way on their stage before the sun was hot.

After Joe had seen to his horses and put the trap away he came into the house and had a glass or two, and wired in with the rest of us like a good 'un. After a bit we see Maddie corner him off and have a long talk, very serious too. After that they went for a walk in the garden and was away a good while. When she came back she looked over at Jim and nodded, as much as to say, "It's all right," and I saw poor old Jim's face brighten up as if a light had passed over it.

By-and-bye she came over and told us all about it. She'd had a hard matter to manage it, for Joe was a square sort of fellow, that had a place of his own, and at first didn't like the notion of being mixed up with our crowd at all. But he was regular shook on Maddie, and she went at him as only a woman can, and I dare-

say, though she didn't tell us, made it part of the bargain, if she was to marry him, to help Jim in this particular way. He was to be well paid for this journey by old Mr. Watson, and he wanted a bit of money before harvest or he wouldn't have taken the job at all.

The end of it was that Jim and Joe sat up ever so late, pretty well on to daylight, smoking and yarning, and Joe practising Jim in all the things he was to do and say, giving him a kind of chart of the stages, and telling him the sort of answers he was to give to the old chap. It was just before daylight when they knocked off, and then Joe goes and peels off his duds and hands 'em over to Jim, rough great-coat and all—up to his chin and down to his toes.

Joe takes Jim's togs. They fitted him all to pieces, and Jim hands him over his horse, saddle, revolver, and spurs, and tells him the old horse is a real plum, and he hopes he'll be good to him. Then Jim shakes hands with us all round. Blessed if the girls wasn't up too, and had some coffee smoking hot for us. "We can sleep when you're all gone," says Maddie, "and perhaps we shan't see old Jim any more" (this was said when Joe was out of the room), "so here's good luck; and when you've got your wife and child again don't forget Maddie Barnes." Then she shook hands with him, and made a quick bolt to her own room. Queer things women are, my word.

When old Jim drove round to the front with the pair of horses, setting up square with his big coat and Joe's "full share" hat on him, we all bursted out laughing. He'd first of all gone to the old gentleman's room and sung out, "All aboard, sir, time's up," just to liven him up a bit. Joe kept away down at the stable.

Well, presently out comes the old chap, with a veil on and his green goggles, winkin' and blinkin' as if he couldn't see a door from a window. He drinks off a cup of coffee and takes a munch of bread and butter, makes a kind of bow to Bella, and shuffles into his carriage. Jim touches up the horses and away they go. We rose a bit of a cheer. Maddie waved her handkerchief out of the window. Jim looked round and raised his whip. That was the last sight any of us had of him for many a day. Poor old Jim!

CHAPTER XVI.

WE mounted, and cleared then as quick as we could. We had wasted too much time, and thrown away a chance or two, as it was. Starlight and I said good-bye to Bella. Maddie wouldn't show out again; said she'd a headache. So Joe was forced to make the best of it, and trust to better luck next time. Off we went—Joe on the right, poncho and all. It was the fun of the world; he looked the dead image of Jim. We yelled again, Starlight and I, and said we'd half a mind to bring him home to the Hollow, and see if dad would be taken in.

But it was near enough turning out no laughing matter for Joe. Just as we were turning off the road into a bit of clear ground we heard the rattle of horses' hoofs, and a voice we knew sang out, "There they are, by Jove! That's Jim Marston—I'd know him among a thousand." With that Sir Ferdinand and half-a-dozen troopers dashed at us, like hawks at a brace of quail. As they came on every man emptied his revolver.

We knew our horses had the foot of the police nags

—bar Sir Ferdinand's, which was a thoroughbred, in top condition. Not a ball touched us—men in the saddle must be very cool and steady to hit anything smaller than a haystack—so we didn't want to make a fight of it. They were two to one, for one thing; and we were pretty sure to lose them, we thought, inside of ten miles, at any rate.

We just had time to have one look at poor Joe Moreton. It was rough on him. He was as game as the rest of us, but he hadn't been used to be shot at—and, my word, they meant it, too. He felt that, for three bullets rattled his way just as Sir Ferdinand spoke.

Like Jim and most natives of his sort, he could ride above a bit; and, my word, he sat down on his horse, and the way he went through the timber was a caution. The old horse was fully fit, and not even Sir Ferdinand was our equal in scrub riding, and we hitting out for our lives, too. Lucky for us and Joe we got into an angle in the scrub, where the timber was that close a naked horse could hardly get through comfortable.

Before we'd gone five miles we steadied and listened. Sir Ferdinand and his troopers were clean out of sight; we couldn't even hear their horses' hoofs on the slaty ranges. Then we pulled up for a bit. There was no fear of Joe's pulling up, though; the last we saw of him he was standing in his stirrups crossing a bit of open ground and riding for dear life. He was out of sight pretty soon after. He knew every foot of ground between here and where he lived on the Fish River, over 40 miles away. So we made sure he'd be somewhere pretty close there before he drew rein. At his present pace all the police in New South Wales couldn't catch him.

Starlight and I, first of all, looked well around for

our landmarks, so as to make sure we shouldn't be riding in a ring, and then stretched out for the Hollow, which we made a bit after sundown, and never saw a policeman all the way.

When we got in, father twigged at once that we'd had a brush for it, and began to swear at us for being such cursed fools as to run all manner of risks when there was no call to do it—not as if we made anything by it, but just for simple foolishness and brag. When he'd about done, all of a sudden he misses Jim, and he faces round on me as fierce as old Crib, and says—

“What have ye done with the boy? If there's anything happened to him you can clear out, Dick Marston, and take your chance, for I won't have ye next or anigh the place.”

I turned on him then, and gave it him back for a bit, because I was riled that everybody should always be thinking of Jim, while no one seemed to care a hang what became of me, except Gracey. Except Gracey! If it wasn't for thinking of her sometimes, and how she stuck to me through thick and thin, I believe I'd have got that savage and desperate again' all the world that I'd have turned out as bad as Moran himself.

That was what partly made him the wild beast he was, I really believe. He always swore he'd been lagged innocent for his first offence, and had to do five years for stealing a horse he'd never seen. However, he'd shook many a one he never was had for, so that made it even; but, somehow, I've always found that a man thinks nothing much about doing time for what he knows he's rightly punished for.

But he never forgets being made to suffer—and hard lines it is—for what he hasn't done; and that injustice

'll rankle in a man's heart for years and years—perhaps all his life—and make him tenfold a worse criminal than he would have been. So there's no mistake—magistrates and judges and all that lot ought to be as careful as they can; for, you'd better believe me, it's far and away better to let two or three bad 'uns off now and again than to convict the wrong man.

However, Starlight stashed the row before long, and blew the old man up a bit for being venturesome himself and going out for the letters when any boy could have boned him, and then giving it us for doing just the same thing.

“As it turns out,” he says, “Jim's got the best chance for a get-away that he'd have had for five years if he'd stopped here, and if you cared half as much about him as anybody else in this world except your blessed old self, you'd be thankful to Dick and me for helping him on his road off; for, by George! if he'd been here another six months you'd have had to bury him alongside of old Devereux.”

Then he told father all about Jim driving the old gentleman down to Melbourne, and made such a good yarn out of Joe Moreton's chivey, and the way he looked round and made tracks when he heard the bullets fly about his ears, that old dad smoothed over a bit, and we had a glass of grog all round and turned in.

We'd got something to do to get through our mail this time. We'd had none on purpose all the time Aileen was with us. There were papers in heaps, and a good lot of letters. Dad said old Davy would hardly speak to him, and kep' on muttering, “Woe and death! Woe and death! He that sheddeth man's blood,” and things like that. That was what set him on the booze when he got

home, and he was vexed as well that there was no one to let him know what was in the letters and read the papers to him. Well, I don't wonder he was a bit crabbed, having to stop by himself for a couple of days with nothing but his own thoughts—and what jolly companions they must have been!—and a lot of papers alongside of him that he could have took off his mind with, and no way of getting a word or a sound out of them. I think about these things now, but I didn't then.

My word! it must be awful rough on a man or woman, when you come to think of it, not to be able to read. Writing isn't wanted so much, though it's handy enough, of course. But just to think what dreadful dull times of it people must have that never can take a book or a newspaper in their hands to pass away an hour, or find out what's going on in the world, or even round about where they live.

Work fills up a lot of the time with people like us, but men and women can't always be working. If they're ever so stanch at the collar there's a gall sometimes or a bout of sickness, or a holiday, when they're drove back upon themselves; and what in the world are they to do? They can't always find people to talk to, and men like father—and there's more like him—ain't particular fond of talking at the best of times.

A day comes when they're tired out with working and lonely and miserable, or dead beat and at odds with everything. All that, whether it's a man or woman, makes 'em wild for a change—a change of any kind, it don't matter what—and drink gives it to 'em. They do drink, of course, ten times more than if they had their minds fed up, full and plenty; and I don't wonder at it, nor no man that knows what men and women really are.

There's a lot talked and written in the papers and books nowadays about educating the people, the whole people, all kinds and sorts, learning 'em to read and write, and cipher, and other things as well, and leaving the parents and the priests to teach 'em religion.

Some people think the religion ought to come first and the reading and writing afterwards. I don't hold with anything of the sort. Men and women that can read and search about and think for themselves are more likely to get some sort of religion that'll keep 'em out of harm's way, at any rate, than those that's had their religion drilled into them, and know nothing else. It's best to have both. I know that. But keeping a child from learning to read and write is like putting out his eyes for fear he might want to walk about and take the wrong road, and be dashed to bits down a drop. A man that has his eyes may go wrong—he often does—like our lot; but a blind man must go wrong, you'd think, or else must have someone to lead him about, a dog or a child, all his life. If it comes to the gaols, you'll find a lot more in them that can't read than of what's called educated people that's gone wrong. If it's nothing else, people that's had a bit of teaching knows very well that it don't pay to go on the cross. It hurts them more than the others when they are punished, and it shows 'em fifty ways to one of passing their lives in something like the way God meant 'em to be passed.

Well, that's sermon enough for once; but a cove that's shut up like me gets think—think—thinking about matters here and there, till he gets chock-full of notions on one point or other, and out it must come. So now you've had mine; and I wish—don't I wish—couldn't I

die cheerful and steady—if I'd only acted up to half or a quarter of 'em?

There was a lot of papers, and some letters, too; as much as gave us all a morning's work to do to open and read half of 'em. Father had a lot, as usual, from all kinds of chaps on the cross, some about horses and cattle, some with a line or two putting him up to where the police was hunting for us, and letting us know about a trap or two that had been set.

There was a tremendous blow up about Hagan and his lot, of course. The papers were full of letters, asking if the country was to be delivered over to assassins and highwaymen, and advising the citizens to roll themselves up into vigilance committees, and execute a little of that justice themselves which the Government was too weak and inefficient to administer. Of course there was a bit of a fuss made for a while, and then everything went on the same as before.

As for the police themselves—the regular force—they knew that officers and men had been doing their level best for months and months past, and that they couldn't have worked a stroke harder, or ridden a yard further if the reward had been ten thousand pounds a man instead of one. Night and day, Sundays and Saturdays, hot or cold, wet or dry, they were always at it, and many a man got that which made an old man of him before his time, if it didn't cook him altogether before the year was out. Of course they did their best to ferret out the way Hagan and his mates had been killed, but they didn't altogether feel pleased with any of these outsiders who went in for the reward, and tried to take their own work out of their hands. So when

they got it hot, like Hagan's party did, the police thought it might act as a warning to the public generally to mind their own business, and not cut in to do work that they weren't paid for.

As for the diggers, they were the great army in occupation of all New South Wales and Port Phillip just then. They didn't trouble their heads much about it after a week. As long as the claims paid well, a few men killed more or less made no great difference. It was the business of the Government of the country to straighten that kind of thing. As long as diggers were let alone and nobody tried to take their gold from them, they didn't so much care about a few stores or banks or stations being robbed. All the time Burke and Daly, Moran, Wall, and Lardner were cruising about the southern and western roads, and at all sorts of points between the two, keeping all the police on the move and driving all the squatters and steady-going people wild, as nobody knew whose turn it might be next.

Besides this, a lot of half-bred duffers, something between horse-stealers and bushrangers, used to turn out now and again when they saw a good chance, blacken their faces or wear masks, perhaps ride thirty or forty miles from their own farms, stick up a coach or a traveller that they knew had money, and then back again, and be ploughing or milking next day just as peaceable and honest-looking as you please. Every now and then these fellows would be caught, and recognized very simply, too. Some of them had stopped and robbed some Chinamen coming from a gold field. One fellow held a pistol to their heads, while his mate searched them. John didn't say much, but those cross eyes of theirs were reckoning up the chaps pretty sharp and quiet.

Next day the head man goes to the Police Inspector and give him as good a description as he could, considering they both wore masks, finishing up with "that piecee man holdim pistol, lide 'em horse, welly big bit." Here John put his fingers into his own opium-trap.

"By George!" says the inspector to the sergeant, "that must be Johnny Dickson. Where was it we noticed a chap with a curb-bit last week? He must have got it for nothing, too; for none of these snaffle-dragging natives would ever waste money in buying a double bridle."

Just as he spoke down comes the very fellow, riding along to a pound sale, looking as respectable and innocent as if he was going to buy seed potatoes, and never had a notion outside of his cultivation paddock. Out walks the sergeant, and beckons to him.

"Come here, Johnny, have you seen a gray horse down your way? That's a fine strong bit you've got—does your horse pull hard?"

The Chinaman shows himself then, and Johnny begins to look rather mixed.

"That piecee man lob me, lob Ah Sing, lob Ah You, one piecee day; allee same bit, all same blidle. You see em," yells John. "You catchee him, sarjin; him wellee bad man, lobbée like hellee."

"Better come in, Johnny, and talk it over," says the sergeant, keeping a friendly hold of his bridle-rein. "Very likely there's nothing in it, but we'll have to search you."

Johnny would have made a bolt if he could, and have knocked Ah Mow's brains out with the stirrup-iron; but it was no go. There were two revolvers dead on him before he could draw, and as some of the Chinaman's money was on him, and a gold ring or two which

he was fool enough to carry, he was committed for trial, found guilty at the Circuit Court, and got fifteen years. His mate was never caught, though the police knew pretty well who he was; but there wasn't evidence enough against him. He wasn't fool enough to ride to those sort of picnics with a bridle that any child could swear to half a mile off.

Every now and then a few of the "offside drivers," as the natives called them, would be collared by a fluke, but in spite of all they could do, all our lot seemed to laugh at the police, while Moran and the rest rode over the whole country side as if it was their own, and robbed and ravaged from Mudgee to Bathurst, and from Goulburn to Albury, and back again.

Once Moran caught a squatter that he had a down on a good way from his own run near Albury. He watched him coming down into a crossing-place and sat behind a rock till he was down close. Then he muzzled him and made him get off his horse.

"Oh! you're Matson, are ye?" he drawls out. "So you've been pounding the Piney Range boys' horses, have yer?" (These were a lot of horse-stealers, mates of Moran's and old pals.) "Now if you do that again I'll shoot yer, d'ye hear? D—yer, I've more than half a mind to shoot yer now. I think I will, too."

Then he took out his revolver and cocked it. Mr. Matson didn't feel happy, I daresay, before a fellow that would rather shoot a man than not. Moran looks at him for four or five minutes, and then drawls—

"I'll not shoot yer to-day; but, by ———, if ever you pound one of them chap's horses I'll ride five hundred miles to do it. You can go now. Hallo! stop a bit. I've heerd you're an out-and-out step-dancer. Just you

take a turn on that bit of grass there, and don't you slum it, for I'm a judge."

When the others came back, Daly and them, there was Moran sitting on a log smoking, and his revolver by him, and Matson dancing away like a mad monkey, the perspiration rolling down his cheeks, and his eyes starting out of his head.

They persuaded Moran to cut the show short, and Mr. Matson was never so glad to get clear away from any little party in his life.

Once they were rather sold. I used to chaff Moran about it when we met, and it always made him that savage he'd have shot me if he dared. Four of them were mooching about a public-house on the southern road, not far from Murrumburrah, when they saw a buggy coming quietly along from the valley below. They heard that a gentleman was coming past that day, a big station-owner down the river, and they meant to make a haul out of him.

Now, they Mr. M'Crea was a man that had a great objection to being interfered with; besides that, he wasn't a likely man to go out of his way for anybody, gentle or simple. He'd heard about these chaps being somewhere about his line of road, so he provided himself with a first-chop repeating rifle before he left Sydney, plenty of cartridges, and two or three books—he was as great a chap for reading as ever I seen; I used to shear for him once—and then starts away for the station with only a boy with him, just the same as usual.

Well, they cut away through the bush, and went out wide, coming into the road behind him, and began to close him up. As soon as he sees this, he gets out of the buggy and tells the boy to walk the horse quietly up

the hill. He picks his man, takes a steady pot at Moran, who was riding ahead, and dashed near tumbled him. The bullet went so close that the wind of it half turned him round. The second shot touched the mane of Daly's horse. They didn't wait for the third, but hooked it out into the timber.

Then they tried coming up on the outside; but the moment they got within range he made such rattling good practice at them that they saw that if they came any closer he'd empty half their saddles, if he didn't do more, before they could rush him. So they thought a gold watch and a £5-note or two (squatters never carry much cash, because they can cash their cheques anywhere) wasn't good enough for the risk.

So they hauled off and left him to finish his journey in peace. He stopped at the public-house an hour, fed his horse, and lunched himself. Then he went on quiet, and they never troubled him after.

CHAPTER XVII.

WHATEVER put it into their heads I don't know, but they started straight off, and never pulled rein till they got to a station belonging to a Mr. Hamilton. They were that savage at missing their tip with Mr. M'Crea that they thought they'd pay off scores with the next swell they could drop on to. Mr. Hamilton was a man that Moran hated, because he always went armed and kept his house ready to stand a siege night and day. He'd been in India a good deal, and was a great hunting man and a dead shot, everybody said. Anyhow, most people thought there was no change to be got out of him, but Moran

was in one of his black tempers, and swore he'd burn the house about his ears if he didn't hand out, and be dashed civil over it, too.

There was a shanty about five miles off. They stopped there drinking till it was dark, and then started off and rode over to Kadombla, as the station was called. All the people in the house that night were Mr. Hamilton and his wife and children, the housemaid, and a man-cook in the kitchen. The men's hut was near a mile off, where the station buildings were. Moran, Burke, Daly, and Wall were in this racket; they thought they were quite able for the job, particularly as it was a night surprise.

They rode into the paddock in front of the house, where there was a field of growing oats that came right up to the garden fence, and tied up their horses down by the creek. Then they walked up through the oats and looked at the house in at the lighted windows. Mr. Hamilton was sitting reading, and his wife sewing near the fireplace. It looked all right, but they knew that he had a gun in every room of the house, with ammunition handy. He never sat down without a revolver about him, and could pick a bird off a bush with it.

After a bit it was settled that Daly, who was the quickest on his pins, should get round by the back door, and the rest threaten to fire through the windows at Mr. Hamilton as soon as he was well inside the house, so that he'd be attacked on two sides.

As it turned out Mr. Hamilton was too quick for them, for his wife heard Daly's footsteps; and as soon as Daly showed at the back door Mr. Hamilton stood ready for him at the end of the passage with his revolver in his hand. Both let drive at the same moment, and

neither hit. Daly went out the way he came, and Mr. Hamilton draws back into his parlour just as the other three let fly through the windows and smashed half the glass. He returned their fire half-a-dozen times over, so quick and true that they began to think he must have someone else in the house with him. He had two double-barrels and his rifle. Mrs. Hamilton brought him his cartridges from time to time, so he kept such a rattle going that they had enough to do to mind themselves, and dursn't make a rush like they thought at first.

They called out to him that if he didn't give in they'd burn the house down and roast every living soul in it. He shouted back for them to do their worst; to come on like men, and not crawl about behind cover. They swore and cursed that they'd make it a warning to him. But they didn't see their way just at first; it wasn't good enough, with his bullets pitching in among 'em close and sharp. One ball went through Burke's hat, and another made a hole in Moran's poncho, which he'd just hung on a tree.

After a bit Moran crawls up and manages to set fire to the stable, that had a good lot of hay in and the master's favourite horse. It blazed up at once and made everything as bright as day. The poor brute of a horse screamed and made a horrid sort of cry, roasted alive by degrees, but through it all they heard Mr. Hamilton shout that he would have one of their lives for this. Moran, they say, laughed like a devil all the time, and said Hamilton would be frizzling himself in another half-hour. Just as he said this he looked out from behind his tree, and I'm blest if a bullet from Hamilton's rifle didn't knock the revolver slap out of his hand; it gave his wrist a jar he didn't get over for a bit, and spoiled the turn-

round arrangements, so that he couldn't load again. After a bit he couldn't move his arm, so he was out of it as far as the shooting went.

There was a chance that the burning stable might catch the house. There was a load of straw in a dray half-way between it and the cottage. If they could have set this alight Hamilton would have had to come out and beg for mercy, when I don't believe he'd have found any that night. But Mrs. Hamilton behaved like a heroine that night, if ever a woman did in this world. She went out with the servant girl—a regular plum, too, for pluck and coolness—and these two managed to drag a tarpaulin over the cart, and so stopped any stray sparks from catching.

By George, that was a game action, and no mistake! It wasn't the only thing the missis and the maid did that night. Once Mr. Hamilton got to the end of his cartridges—he blazed away at such a tearing rate, and it's well he did or they'd have "jumped" the house long before. As I was saying—it was one of themselves who told me all about the whole racket afterwards—they saw Mrs. Hamilton cross the room just in the line of their fire; over she walked as steady as a soldier. Not that they intended to fire at her—they weren't quite bad enough for that—but she went across just as they'd pulled trigger, and they heard afterwards that one of the bullets just grazed her shoulder. Anyhow, she didn't seem to mind, and, as it happened, one of them very cartridges she handed her husband carried a man's life in it. The next thing they saw—it half-riled 'em and half made 'em laugh—was the servant girl walk in with a tray with wine and glasses and biscuits on it, just as if this was the regular family way of spending the even-

ing. Shows how people differ from one another. Here was this girl and her missis as cool and steady as the Guards at Waterloo, and there was the man-cook in the kitchen a-lying under the table, flat on his face, cryin' and prayin' and swearin', all in a breath, frightened out of his miserable life. He ought to have been taken out and stuck before one of the windows. He was worse than a blackfellow, I consider.

I daresay Mr. Hamilton felt better after a glass of grog. I should think he wanted it after burning all that powder. It's a dry thing fighting at the best of times. Anyhow, now the stable was burnt down pretty low, Burke thought he'd get a better chance over one corner of the garden fence, so he crawled up and popped his head over the fence at a place where he could see through a side window that led into the verandah. If he could burst this window open when Mr. Hamilton was firing the other way he'd take him in the flank, and Moran and Daly they'd made it up to rush for the front as soon as they heard the glass smash in the side window.

It wasn't a bad notion, but Burke didn't know that Mrs. Hamilton had watched him from a dark corner in the verandah. I believe that brave lady heard everything and saw everything that happened that night, and was as good as two men. She that had been brought up in Sydney and never saw any bush ways till she followed her husband to Kadombla. Anyhow, when she told him about Burke he slips out, stands behind an angle, and the next time Burke pops up his head he lets him have it. Burke drops on his back with a rifle-bullet slap through his throat. He never stirred again, and Mr. Hamilton was firing another broadside from the windows of the parlour before they knew he was down.

When they went over to him they found him as dead as a door-nail. Things didn't look over bright now—one man dead, one man hurt—for Moran's arm was swelling up and giving him fits. The other two came to think it wasn't good enough. So they dragged Burke—he wasn't the worst of 'em by a long way—under a she-oak tree, took his revolver, and left him there. Then they went down to the creek where they tied the horses and rode off.

Mr. Hamilton waited for about an hour so as to be sure they weren't stringing him on to go into the open to be potted at. Then he went down to the men's hut and roused them up. The police came over in the morning, but beyond identifying Burke and getting a coroner's inquest held on him there wasn't anything else they could do. They left a man in charge of the body, and one to look after the house, and came away.

So this was the end of the famous Kadombla battle. Mr. Hamilton lost a good stable and a good horse, and had all the front of his house riddled and smashed with bullets, but he scared off the other side and had a long way the best of it.

A line from Jim came a fortnight afterwards. He got safe down all the way to Melbourne, and met Jeanie and his baby all right at St. Kilda. Nobody ever tumbled that he wasn't Joe Moreton, and the old Mr. Watson was particularly pleased with his steadiness and good conduct, as he said. He made him a present over and above his contract money, and said he should always feel obliged to him. Jim said he wasn't obliged to him at all, it was the other way, which was true enough, if he'd only known why, but of course he didn't. It was the best thing that could have happened to Jim, the police getting on to us and firing at Joe Moreton, because it kept

them sure and certain that Jim was still in the country and not far from his old beat, consequently they never looked anywhere else for him.

Jim wrote he was as happy as a king down in Melbourne with Jeanie, and there wasn't much fear of anyone remembering him down there. They'd got money enough to live comfortable on, and the only thing that troubled him was that the ships that were outward bound were all that closely watched that he didn't like to chance taking his passage. Just for something to do he had taken a billet as storeman at £3 a week. It was steady work and suited very well. He kept up his Yankee beard and ways, and everyone took him to be one. The best thing we could do was to slip over to Queensland, if we could manage, and get a ship from there. He wished we could clear out from where we were anyhow, and be as happy as he was. If anything happened to mother Aileen ought to come down and live with him and Jeanie.

So Jim was all right, that was so much to the good; but it was a deal harder matter our getting away.

We were too well known altogether, and had no mercy to expect if we were caught. We knew that, and didn't want to throw away a chance by trying to get out of the country before we were ready. We didn't the proper time was come.

We hadn't been long at home, just enough to get tired of doing nothing, when we got a letter from Bella Barnes, telling us that she was going to get married the day after the Turon races, and reminding Starlight that he had promised to come to her wedding. If he didn't think it was too risky she hoped he'd come. There was going to be a race ball, and it was sure to be good fun. It would be a good wind-up, and Maddie was coming

out a great swell. Sir Ferdinand would be there, but there'd be such a crowd anybody would pass muster, and so on.

“Yours sincerely,

“ISABELLA BARNES.

“P.S.—There was a big handicap, with 500 added; hadn't we a good horse enough?”

“Well done, Bella!” says Starlight. “I vote we go, Dick. I never went to a hop with a price on my head before. A thousand pounds, too! Quite a new sensation. It settles the question. And we'll enter Rainbow for the handicap. He ought to be good enough for anything they're likely to have.”

“Captain Starlight's Rainbow, 9st. 8lb.,” I said, “with Dick Marston to lead him up to the Judge's box. How will that wash? And what are the police going to be about all the time? Bella's gone out of her senses about her marriage and thinks we are too.”

“You're a good fellow, Richard, and stanch, but you're like your father—you haven't any imagination. I see half-a-dozen ways of doing the whole thing. Besides, our honour's concerned. I never made a promise yet, for good or for evil, that I didn't carry out, and some have cost me dearly enough, God knows. Fancy running our horses and going to the ball under the noses of the police—the idea is delicious!”

“I daresay you're about tired of your life,” I said. “I'm pretty sure I am; but why we should ride straight into the lion's mouth, to please a silly girl, I can't see. I haven't overmuch sense, I know, or I shouldn't be here; but I'm not such a dashed fool as all that comes to.”

“My mind is made up, Richard—I have decided

irrevocably. Of course, you needn't come, if you see objections; but I'll bet you my Dean and Adams revolver and the Navy Colt against your repeating rifle that I do all I've said, and clear out safe."

"Done!" I said. "I've no doubt you'll try; but you might as well try to pull down the walls of Berrima gaol with a hayrake. You'll make Sir Ferdinand's fortune, that's all. He always said he'd die happy if he could only bag you and the Marstons. He'll be made Inspector-General of Police."

Starlight smiled in his queer, quiet way.

"If he doesn't rise to the top of the tree until he takes me—alive, I mean—he'll die a sub-inspector. But we'd better sleep on it. This is an enterprise of great pith and moment, and requires no end of thought. We must get your sister to come over. That will crown all."

"Good-night," I said, rather hasty. "We'd better turn the Hollow into Tarban Creek, and advertise for boarders."

Next morning I expected he'd think better of it—we'd had a glass or two of grog; but no, he was more set on it than ever, and full of dodges to work it to rights. He certainly was wonderful clever in all sorts of ways when there was any devilment to be carried out. Half as much in the straight way would have made a man of him. But that's the way of the world all over. He ain't the only one.

As for father, he was like me, and looked on the notion as rank foolishness. He swore straight on end for about twenty minutes, and then said he expected Starlight would have his own way as usual; but he'd play at that game once too often. He supposed he'd be left in the Hollow all by himself, with Warrigal and the dog for company.

"Warrigal goes with me—might want him," says Star-

light. "You're losing your nerve, governor. Perhaps you'd like to go to the ball, too?"

Father gave a sort of growl, and lit his pipe and wouldn't say no more. Starlight and I regular talked it out, and, after I'd heard all he had to say, it didn't look quite so impossible as it did at first. We were to work apart. He was to get in with some of the betting men or sporting people that always came to country races, and I was to find out some of our old digger mates and box up with them. Warrigal would shift for himself and look after the horses, and have them ready in case we had to clear at short notice.

"And who was to enter Rainbow and look after him?"

"Couldn't we get old Jacob Benton; he's the best trainer I've seen since I left home? Billy the Boy told us the other day he was out of a job, and was groom at Jonathan's; had been sacked for getting drunk, and so on. He'll be all the more likely to keep sober for a month."

"The very man," I said. "He can ride the weight, and train too. But we can't have him here, surely!"

"No; but I can send the horse to him at Jonathan's, and he can get him fit there as well as anywhere. There's nearly a month yet; he's pretty hard, and he's been regularly exercised lately."

Jacob Benton was a wizened, dried-up old Yorkshireman. He'd been head man in a good racing stable, but drink had been the ruin of him—lost him his place, and sent him out here. He could be trusted to go right through with a job like ours, for all that. Like many men that drink hard, he was as sober as a judge between one burst and another. And once he took over a horse in training he touched nothing but water till the race was run and the horse back in his box. Then he most times went in an awful

perisher—took a month to it, and was never sober day or night the whole time. When he'd spent all his money he'd crawl out of the township and get away into the country more dead than alive, and take the first job that offered. But he was fonder of training a good horse than anything else in the world; and if he'd got a regular flyer, and was treated liberal, he'd hardly allow himself sleep or time to eat his meals till he'd got him near the mark. He could ride, too, and was an out-and-out judge of pace.

When we'd regular chalked it out about entering Rainbow for the Grand Turon Handicap, we sent Warrigal over to Billy the Boy, and got him to look up old Jacob. He agreed to take the old horse, the week before the races, and give him a last bit of French-polish if we'd keep him in steady work till then. From what he was told of the horse he expected he would carry any weight he was handicapped for and pull it off easy. He was to enter him in his own name, the proper time before the races. If he won he was to have 10 per cent. on winnings; if he lost, a ten-pound note would do him. He could ride the weight with some lead in his saddle, and he'd never wet his lips with grog till the race was over.

CHAPTER XVIII.

So that part of the work was chalked out. The real risky business was to come. I never expected we should get through all straight. But the more I hung back the more shook on it Starlight seemed to be. He was like a boy home from school sometimes—mad for any kind of fun with a spice of devilment in it.

About a week before the races we all cleared out, leaving father at home, and pretty sulky, too. Warrigal led Rainbow; he was to take him to Jonathan Barnes's, and meet old Jacob there. He was to keep him until it was time to go to Turon. We didn't show there ourselves this time; we were afraid of drawing suspicion on the place.

We rode right into Turon, taking care to be well after dark. A real pleasure it was to see the old place again. The crooked streets, the lighted-up shops, the crowd of jolly diggers walking about smoking, or crowding round the public-house bars, the row of the stampers in the quartz-crushing machines going night and day. It all reminded me of the pleasant year Jim and I had spent here. I wished we'd never had to leave it. We parted just outside the township for fear of accidents. I went to a little place I knew, where I put up my horse—could be quiet there, and asked no questions. Starlight, as usual, went to the best hotel, where he ordered everybody about and was as big a swell as ever. He had been out in the north-west country, and was going to Sydney to close for a couple of stations that had been offered to him.

That night he went to the barber, had his hair cut and his beard shaved, only leaving his moustache and a bit of whisker like a ribbon. He put on a suit of tweed, all one colour, and ordered a lot more clothes, which he paid for, and were to be left at the hotel till he returned from Sydney.

Next day he starts for Sydney; what he was going to do there he didn't say, and I didn't ask him. He'd be back the day before the races, and in good time for all the fun, and Bella's wedding into the bargain. I managed to find out that night that Kate Mullockson had left

Turon. She and her husband had sold their place and gone to another diggings just opened. I was glad enough of this, for I knew that her eyes were sharp enough to spy me out whatever disguise I had on; and even if she didn't I should always have expected to find her eyes fixed upon me. I breathed freer after I heard this bit of news.

The gold was better even than when we were there. A lot of men who were poor enough when we were there had made fortunes. The field never looked better, and the hard-driving, well-paid, jolly mining life was going on just the same as ever; everyone making money fast—spending it faster—and no one troubling themselves about anything except how much the washdirt went to the load, and whether the sinking was through the false bottom or not.

When I first came I had a notion of mating in with some diggers, but when I saw how quiet everybody took it, and what thousands of strangers there were all over the place, I gave myself out for a speculator in mining shares from Melbourne. So I shaved off most of my beard, had my hair cut short, and put on a tall hat. I thought that would shift any sort of likeness there might be to my old self, and, though it was beastly uncomfortable, I stuck to it all the time.

I walked about among the stables and had a good look at all the horses that were in training. Two or three good ones, as usual, and a lot of duffers. If Rainbow wasn't beat on his condition, he had pace and weight-carrying for the best of them. I hardly thought he could lose it, or a bigger stake in better company. I was that fond of the horse I thought he was good enough for an English Derby.

Well, I kept dark, you be sure, and mooned about, buying a share at a low price now and then just to let 'em see I had money and meant something. My name was Mr. Bromford, and I lived at Petersham, near Sydney.

The day before the races there was a lot of excitement in the town. Strangers kept pouring in from everywhere round about, and all the hotels were crammed full. Just as I was wondering whether Starlight was going to turn up till next day I saw a four-in-hand drag rattle down the street to the principal inn, and a crowd gather round it as three gentlemen got out and went into the inn.

"You'll see after all our luggage, will you, ostler?" says one of them to the groom, "and whatever you do don't forget my umbwella!"

Some of the diggers laughed.

"Know those coves?" I said to a man that stopped at the same house as I did.

"Don't you know? Them's the two Mr. Dawsons, of Wideview, great sporting men, natives, and ever so rich. They've some horses to run to-morrow. That's a new chum from England that's come up with 'em."

I hardly knew him at first. His own mother wouldn't, I believe. He'd altered himself that wonderful as I could hardly even now think it was Starlight; and yet he wasn't a bit like the young Englishman he gammoned to be last year, or the Hon. Frank Haughton either. He had an eye-glass this time, and was a swell from top to toe. How and when he'd picked up with the Mr. Dawsons I couldn't tell; but he'd got a knack of making people like him—especially when they didn't know him. Not that it was worse when they did. It wasn't for that. He was always the same. The whitest man I ever knew, or ever shall—that I say and stick to—but of course people can't be expected to as-

sociate with men that have "done time." Well, next day was the races. I never saw such a turn out in the colony before. Every digger on the field had dropped work for the day; all the farmers, and squatters, and country people had come in for miles round on all sides. The Commissioner and all the police were out in full uniform, and from the first moment the hotels were opened in the morning till breakfast time all the bars were full, and the streets crowded with miners and strangers and people that seemed to have come from the ends of the earth. When I saw the mob there was I didn't see so much to be jerran about, as it was fifty to one in favour of anyone that was wanted, in the middle of such a muster of queer cattle as was going on at Turon that day.

About eleven o'clock everyone went out to the course. It wasn't more than a mile from town. The first race wasn't to be run till twelve; but long before that time the road was covered with horsemen, traps of every kind and sort, every horse and mare in the whole district.

Most of the miners went in four-horse coaches and 'buses that were plying all day long from the town and back; very few walked. The country people mostly drove in spring-carts, or rode on horseback. Any young fellows that had a good horse liked to show him off, of course; the girls in habits of their own make, perhaps, and now and then a top hat, thought they looked very well too. They could ride, some of them, above a bit, and it made me think of the old days when Jim and I and Aileen used to ride into Bargo races together, and how proud we were of her, even when she was a little thing, and we used to groom up the old pony till we nearly scrubbed the hide off him.

It was no use thinking of that kind of thing, and I

began to wonder how Starlight was getting on with his friends, when I saw the Dawsons' drag come up the straight, with four upstanding ripping bay horses in top condition, and well matched. There was Starlight on the box seat, alongside of Jack Dawson, the eldest brother, who could handle the ribbons in style, and was a man every inch of him, only a bit too fast; didn't care about anything but horses and dogs, and lived every day of his life. The other brother was standing up behind, leaning over and talking to Starlight, who was "in great form," as he used to say himself, and looked as if he'd just come out of a band-box.

He had on a silk coat buttoned round him, a white top hat with a blue silk veil. His eye-glass was stuck in his eye all the time, and he had kid gloves on that fitted his hands like wax. I really couldn't hardly take my oath he was the same man, and no wonder nobody else couldn't. I was wondering why Sir Ferdinand wasn't swelling about, bowing to all the ladies, and making that thoroughbred of his dance and arch his neck, when I heard someone say that he'd got news that Moran and the rest of 'em had stuck up a place about forty miles off, towards Forbes, and Sir Ferdinand had sworn at his luck for having to miss the races; but started off just as he was, and taken all the troopers but two with him.

"Who brought the news?"

"Oh! a youngster called William Jones—said he lived out there. A black boy came with him that couldn't hardly speak English; he went with 'em to show the way."

"Well, but how did they know it was true?" says I. "It might have been only a stall."

"Oh, the young fellow brought a letter from the over-

seer, saying they might hold out for a few hours, if the police came along quick."

"It's a good thing they started at once," says I. "Them boys are very useful sometimes, and blackfellows, too."

I went off then, and had a laugh to myself. I was pretty middling certain it was Billy the Boy and War-rigal. Starlight had wrote the note before we started, only I didn't think they'd be game to deliver it themselves.

Now the police was away, all but a couple of young fellows—I went and had a look to make sure—that didn't know any of us by sight, I thought we might enjoy ourselves for once in a way without watching everyone that came nigh us. And we did enjoy ourselves. I did, I know; though you'd think, as we carried our lives in our hands, in a manner of speaking, the fun couldn't have been much. But it's a queer world! Men like us, that don't know what's to happen to them from one day to another, if they can only see their way for a week ahead, often have more real pleasure in the bit of time they have to themselves than many a man has in a year that has no call to care about time or money or be afraid of anybody.

As for Starlight, if he'd been going to be hung next week it would have been all one to him. He'd have put off thinking about it until about an hour before, and then would have made all his arrangements and done the whole business quietly and respectably, without humbug, but without any flashness either. You couldn't put him wrong, or make him do or say anything that was out of place.

However, this time nobody was going to be hung or took or anything else. We'd as good as got a free par-

don for the time being, now the police was away; no one else would have meddled with us if we'd had our names printed on our hats. So we made the most of it, I expect. Starlight carried on all sorts of high ropes. He was introduced to all the nobs, and I saw him in the grand stand and the saddling-paddock, taking the odds in tens and fifties from the ring-men—he'd brought a stiffish roll of notes with him—and backing the Dawson stable right out.

It turned out afterwards that he'd met them at an inn on the mountains, and helped them to doctor one of their leaders that had been griped. So they took a fancy to him, and, being free-hearted sort of fellows, asked him to keep them company in the drag, and let one of the grooms ride his horse. Once he started he kept them alive, you may be sure, and by the time they got to Turon they were ready to go round the world with him, and swore they'd never met such a man in their lives—very likely they hadn't, either. He was introduced to the judge and the stewards and the Commissioner and the police magistrate, and as much fuss made over him as if he was the Governor's son. It was as good as a play. I got up as near as I dared once or twice, and I couldn't hardly keep from bursting out laughing when I saw how grave he talked and drawled and put up his eye-glass, and every now and then made 'em all laugh, or said something reminded him of India, where he'd last come from.

Well, that was a regular fizzer of a spree, if we never had another. The racing was very fair, and, as luck would have it, the Dawson horses won all the big money, and, as they started at longish odds, they must have made a pot of money, and Starlight, too, as he'd gone in a

docker for their stable. This made them better friends than ever, and it was Dawson here and Lascelles there all over the course.

Well, the day went over at last, and all of them that liked a little fun and dancing better than heavy drinking made it up to go to the race ball. It was a subscription affair—guinea tickets, just to keep out the regular roughs, and the proceeds to go to the Turon Jockey Club Fund. All the swells had to go, of course, and, though they knew it would be a crush and pretty mixed, as I heard Starlight say, the room was large, the band was good, and they expected to get a fair share of dancing after an hour or so.

Starlight and the Dawsons dined at the camp, and were made a good deal of—their health drunk and what not—and Starlight told us afterwards he returned thanks for the strangers and visitors; said he'd been told Australia was a rough place, but he never expected to find so much genuine kindness and hospitality and, he might add, so much refinement and gentlemanly feeling. Speaking for himself, he had never expected, considering his being a total stranger, to be welcomed so cordially and entertained so handsomely, more particularly at the mess of Her Majesty's goldfields officials, whose attention on this occasion they might be assured he would never forget. He would repeat, the events of this particular day would never be effaced from his memory. (Tremendous cheering.)

After dinner, and when the champagne had gone round pretty reasonable, the Commissioner proposed they should all adjourn to the ball, when, if Mr. Lascelles cared about dancing, he ventured to think a partner or two could be found for him. So they all got up and

went away down to the hall of the Mechanics' Institute—a tremendous big room that had been built to use as a theatre, and to give lectures and concerts in. These sort of things are very popular at diggings. Miners like to be amused, and have plenty of money to spend when times are good. There was hardly a week passed without some kind of show being on when we went there.

I walked down quietly an hour or so before most of the people, so as to be in the way to see if Aileen came. We'd asked her to come on the chance of meeting us there, but we hadn't got any word, and didn't know whether she could manage it nor whether George would bring her. I had a sort of half-and-half notion that perhaps Gracey might come, but I didn't like to think of it for fear of being disappointed, and tried to make believe I didn't expect her.

I gave in my ticket and walked in about eight o'clock, and sat down pretty close to the door so that I could see the people as they came in. I didn't feel much up to dancing myself, but I'd have ridden a thousand miles to have had the chance of seeing those two girls that night.

I waited and waited while one after another came in, till the big hall was pretty near filled, and at nine o'clock or so the music struck up, and the first dance began. That left the seats pretty bare, and between listening to the music and looking at the people, and thinking I was back again at the old claim, and passing half-an-hour at a dance-house, I didn't mind the door so much till I heard somebody give a sort of sigh not very far off, and I looked towards the door and saw two women sitting between me and it.

They were Aileen and Gracey sure enough. My head almost turned round, and I felt my heart beat—beat in

a way it never did when the bullets were singing and whistling all about. It was the suddenness of it, I expect. I looked at them for a bit. They didn't see me, and were just looking about them as I did. They were dressed very quiet, but Gracey had a little more ornament on her, and a necklace or something round her neck. Aileen was very pale, but her beautiful dark hair was dressed up a bit with one rosebud in it, and her eyes looked bigger and brighter than they used to do. She looked sad enough, but every now and then Gracey said something that made her smile a bit, and then I thought she was the handsomest girl in the room. Gracey had just the same steady, serious, kind face as ever; she'd hardly changed a bit, and seemed pleased, just like a child at the play, with all that was going on round about.

There was hardly anybody near the corner where they were, so I got up and went over. They both looked at me for a minute as if they'd never seen me before, and then Aileen turned as pale as death, and Gracey got altogether as red, and both held out their hands. I sat down by the side of Aileen, and we all began to talk. Not much at first, and very quiet, for fear notice might be taken, but I managed to let them know that the police had all been called off in another direction, and that we should be most likely safe till to-morrow or next day.

"Oh! dear!" says Gracey, "wasn't it awfully rash of you to come here and run all this risk just to come to Bella Barnes's wedding? I believe I ought to be jealous of that girl."

"All Starlight's fault," I said; "but anyhow, it's through him we've had this meeting here. I was dead against coming all the time, and I never expected things to turn out so lucky as they have done."

"Will he be here to-night?" Aileen says, very soft and timid like. "I almost wished I'd stayed away, but Gracey here would come. Young Cyrus Williams brought us. He wanted to show his wife the races, and take her to the ball. There they are, dancing together. George is away at the races."

"You will see Starlight about ten or eleven o'clock, I expect," I said. "He's dining with the Commissioner and the camp officers. They'll all come together, most likely."

"Dining at the camp!" says Aileen, looking regularly perished. "You don't mean to say they've taken him?"

"I mean what I say. He's here with the Mr. Dawsons, of Wideview, and has been hand-and-glove with all the swells. I hardly think you'll know him. It's as much as I did."

Poor Aileen gave another sigh.

"Do you think he'll know me?" she says. "Oh! what a foolish girl I was to think for a moment that he could care about a girl like me. Oh! I wish I had never come."

"Nonsense," says Gracey, who looked a deal brighter on it. "Why, if he's the man you say he is, this will only bring him out a bit. What do you think, Di— I mean Mr. Jones?"

"That's right, Miss Storefield," says I. "Keep to the company manners to-night. We don't know who may be listening; but I'm not much afraid of being bowled out this particular night. Somehow I feel ready to chance everything for an hour's happiness like this."

Gracey said nothing, but looked down, and Aileen kept turning towards the door as if she half hoped and was half afraid of seeing him come in. By-and-bye we

heard someone say, "Here comes the Commissioner; all the camp will be here now," and there was a bit of a move to look at them as they came in.

CHAPTER XIX.

A GOOD many gentlemen and ladies that lived in the town and in the diggings, or near it, had come before this and had been dancing away and enjoying themselves, though the room was pretty full of diggers and all sorts of people. But as everybody was quiet and well-behaved, it didn't make much odds who was there

But, of course, the Commissioner was the great man of the whole place, and the principal visitors, like the Mr. Dawsons and some others, were bound to come along with him. Then there were the other Government officers, the bankers and surveyors, lawyers and doctors, and so on. All of them took care to come a little late with their wives and families so as to be in the room at the same time as the swell lot.

Bella Barnes was going to marry a surveyor, a wildish young fellow, but a good one to work as ever was. She was going to chance his coming straight afterwards. He was a likely man to rise in his office, and she thought she'd find a way to keep him out of debt and drinking and gambling too.

Well, in comes the Commissioner and his friends, very grand indeed, all dressed like swells always do in the evening, I believe, black all over, white tie, shining boots, white kid gloves, flower in their buttonhole, all regular. People may laugh, but they did look different from the others—showed more blood like. I don't care what they say, there is such a thing.

Close by the Commissioner, laughing and talking, was the two Mr. Dawsons; and—I saw Aileen give a start—who should come next, cheek by jowl with the police magistrate, whom he'd been making laugh with something he'd said as they came in, but Starlight himself, looking like a regular prince—their pictures anyhow—and togged out to the nines like all the rest of 'em. Aileen kept looking at him as he lounged up the ball-room, and I thought she'd fall down in a faint or bring herself to people's notice by the wild, earnest, sad way she looked at him. However he'd got his clothes and the rest of it that fitted him like as if they'd been grown for him, I couldn't think. But of course he'd made all that right when he went to Sydney, and had 'em sent up with his luggage in Mr. Dawson's drag.

Though he didn't seem to notice anything, I saw that he knew us. He looked round for a moment, and smiled at Aileen.

"That's a pretty girl," he said to one of the young fellows; "evidently from the country. I must get introduced to her."

"Oh, we'll introduce you," says the other man. "They're not half bad fun, these bush girls, some of them."

Well, a new dance was struck up by the band just after they'd got up to the top of the room, and we saw Starlight taken up and introduced to a grand lady, the wife of the head banker. The Commissioner and some of the other big wigs danced in the same quadrille. We all moved a bit higher to get a good look at him. His make-up was wonderful. We could hardly believe our eyes. His hair was a deal shorter than he ever wore it (except in one place), and he'd shaved nearly all but his

moustache. That was dark brown and heavy. You couldn't see his mouth except when he smiled, and then his teeth were as white as Warrigal's nearly and as regular. There was a softness, too, about his eyes when he was in a good temper and enjoying himself that I hardly ever saw in a man's face. I could see Aileen watching him when he talked to this lady and that, and sometimes she looked as if she didn't enjoy it.

He was only waiting his chance, though, for after he'd had a dance or two we saw him go up to one of the stewards. They had big rosettes on, and presently they walked round to us, and the steward asked the favour of Aileen's name, and then begged, by virtue of his office, to present Lieutenant Lascelles, a gentleman lately from India, who had expressed a wish to be introduced to her. Such a bow Starlight made, too. We could hardly help staring. Poor Aileen hardly knew whether to laugh or to cry when he sat down beside her and asked for the pleasure of a dance.

She wouldn't do that. She only came there to see him, she said, and me; but he persuaded her to walk round the room, and then they slipped into one of the supper-rooms, where they were able to talk without being disturbed, and say what they had in their hearts. I got Gracey to take a turn with me, and we were able to have our little say. She was, like Aileen, miserable enough and afraid to think of our ever having the chance of getting married and living happy like other people, but she told me she would wait and remain faithful to me—if it was to her life's end—and that as soon as I could get away from the country and promise her to leave our wild lives behind she was ready to join us and follow me all over the world. Over and over again she

tried to persuade me to get away like Jim, and said how happy he was now, and how much better it was than stopping where we were, and running terrible risks every day and every hour. It was the old story over again; but I felt better for it, and really meant to try and cut loose from all this cross-work. We hadn't too much time. Aileen was fetched back to her seat, and then Starlight went off to his friends at the other end of the room, and was chaffed for flirting with a regular currency lass by one of the Dawsons.

"I admire his taste," says the Commissioner. "I really think she's the prettiest girl in the room if she was well dressed and had a little more animation. I wonder who she is? What's her name, Lascelles? I suppose you know all about her by this time."

"Her name is Martin, or Marston, or some such name," answered Starlight, quite cool and pleasant. "Deuced nice, sensible girl, painfully quiet, though. Wouldn't dance, though, at all, and talked very little."

"By Jove! I know who she is," says one of the young chaps. "That's Aileen Marston, sister to Dick and Jim. No wonder she isn't over lively. Why, she has two brothers bushrangers, regular out-and-outers. There's a thousand on each of their heads."

"Good gad!" says Starlight, "you don't say so! Poor girl! What a most extraordinary country! You meet with surprises every day, don't you?"

"It's a pity Sir Ferdinand isn't here," said the Commissioner. "I believe she's an acquaintance of his. I've always heard she was a splendid girl, though, poor thing, frets to death about her family. I think you seem to have cheered her up, though, Lascelles. She doesn't look half so miserable as she did an hour ago."

"Naturally, my dear fellow," says Starlight, pulling his moustache; "even in this savage country—beg your pardon—one's old form seems to be appreciated. Pardon me, I must regain my partner; I am engaged for this dance."

"You seem disposed to make the most of your opportunities," says the Commissioner. "Dawson, you'll have to look after your friend. Who's the enslaver now?"

"I didn't quite catch her name," says Starlight, lazily; "but it's that tall girl near the pillar, with the pale face and dark eyes."

"You're not a bad judge for a new chum," says one of the goldfield subs. "Why, that's Maddie Barnes. I think she's the pick of all the down-the-river girls, and the best dancer here, out-and-out. Her sister's to be married to-morrow, and we're all going to see her turned off."

"Really, now?" says Starlight, putting up his eyeglass. "I begin to think I must write a book. I'm falling upon adventures hourly. Oh, the 'Morgenblätter.' What a treat! Can she valse, do you think?"

"You try her," says the young fellow. "She's a regular stunner."

It was a fine, large room, and the band, mostly Germans, struck up some outlandish queer sort of tune that I'd never heard anything like before; whatever it was it seemed to suit most of the dancing people, for the floor was pretty soon full up, and everybody twisting round and round as if they were never going to stop. But, to my mind, there was not a couple there that was a patch on Maddie and Starlight. He seemed to move round twice as light and easy as anyone else; he looked somehow different from all the others. As for Maddie, wher-

ever she picked it up she went like a bird, with a free, springy sort of sliding step, and all in time to the music, anybody could see. After a bit some of the people sat down, and I could hear them passing their remarks and admiring both of 'em till the music stopped. I couldn't make out whether Aileen altogether liked it or not; anyhow she didn't say anything.

About an hour afterwards the camp party left the room, and took Starlight with them. Someone said there was a little loo and hazard at the Commissioner's rooms. Cyrus Williams was not in a hurry to go home, or his young wife either, so I stayed and walked about with the two girls, and we had ever so much talk together, and enjoyed ourselves for once in a quiet way. A good crowd was sure to be at Bella Barnes's wedding next day. It was fixed for two o'clock, so as not to interfere with the races. The big handicap was to be run at three, so we should be able to be at the church when Bella was turned off, and see Rainbow go for the great race of the day afterwards. When that was run we intended to clear. It would be time for us to go then. Things were middling straight, but it mightn't last.

Next day was the great excitement of the meeting. The "big money" was all in the handicap, and there was a big field, with two or three cracks up from Sydney, and a very good local horse that all the diggers were sweet on. It was an open race, and every man that had a note or a fiver laid it out on one horse or another.

Rainbow had been entered in proper time and all regular by old Jacob, under the name of Darkie, which suited in all ways. He was a dark horse, sure enough; dark in colour, and dark enough as to his performances

—nobody knew much about them. We weren't going to enter him in his right name, of course.

Old Jacob was a queer old fellow in all his ways and notions, so we couldn't stable him in any of the stables in Turon, for fear of his being "got at," or something. So when I wanted to see him the day before, the old fellow grinned, and took me away about a mile from the course; and there was old Rainbow, snug enough—in a tent, above all places!—but as fine as a star, and as fit as ever a horse was brought to the post.

"What's the fun of having him under canvas?" I said. "Who ever heard of a horse being trained in a tent before—not but what he looks first-chop."

"I've seen horses trained in more ways than one," says he, "and I can wind 'em up, in the stable and out of it, as mighty few in this country can—that is, when I put the muzzle on. There's a deal in knowing the way horses is brought up. Now this here's an excitable hoss in a crowd."

"Is he?" I said. "Why, he's as cool and steady as an old trooper when—"

"When powder's burning and bullets is flying," says the old chap, grinning again; "but this here's a different crowd. When he's got a training saddle and seven or eight stone up, and there's two or three hundred horses rattling about this side on him and that, it brings out the old racehorse feeling that's in his blood, and never had a chance to show itself afore."

"I see, and so you want to keep him quiet till the last minute?"

"That's just it," says he, "I've got the time to a second"—here he pulls out a big old turnip of a silver

watch—"and I'll have him up just ready to be weighed out last. I never was late in my life."

"All right," I said, "but don't draw it too fine. Have you got your weight all right?"

"Right to a hounce," says he, "nine stun four they've put on him, and him an untried horse. I told 'em it was weighing him out of the race, but they laughed at me. Never you mind, though, he can carry weight and stay too. My ten per cent.'s as safe as the bank. He'll put the stuns on all them nobs, too, that think a racehorse must always come out of one of their training stables."

"Well, good-bye, old man," says I, "and good luck. One of us will come and lead you into the weighing yard, if you pull it off, and chance the odds, if Sir Ferdinand himself was at the gate."

"All right," says he, "I'll look out for you," and off he goes. I went back and told Aileen and Gracey, and we settled that they were to drive out to the course with Cyrus Williams and his wife. I rode, thinking myself safer on horseback, for fear of accidents. Starlight, of course, went in the Dawsons' drag, and was going to enjoy himself to the last minute. He had his horse ready at a moment's notice, and Warrigal was not far off to give warning, or to bring up his horse if we had to ride for it.

Well, the first part of the day went well enough, and then about half-past one we all went down to the church. The young fellow that was to marry Bella Barnes was known on the field and well liked by the miners, so a good many of them made it up to go and see the wedding. They'd heard of Bella and Maddie, and wanted to see what they looked like.

The church was on the side of the town next the

racecourse, so they hadn't far to go. By-and-bye, as the crowd moved that way, Starlight says to the Commissioner—

“Where are all these good folks making for?”

“Why, the fact is there's to be a wedding,” he says, “and it excites a good deal of attention as the young people are well known on the field and popular. Bella Barnes and her sister are very fine girls in their way. Suppose we go and look on too? There won't be anything now before the big race.”

“By Jove! a first-rate ideah,” says Starlight. “I should like to see an Australian wedding above all things.”

“This will be the real thing, then,” says Mr. Jack Dawson. “Let's drive up to our hotel, put up the horses, have a devil and a glass of champagne, and we can be back easy in time for the race.” So away they went. Cyrus drove the girls and his wife in his dog-cart, so we were there all ready to see the bride come up.

It looked a regular grand affair, my word. The church was that crammed there was hardly a place to sit or stand in. Every woman, young and old, in the country side was there, besides hundreds of diggers who sat patiently waiting as if some wonderful show were going to take place. Aileen and Gracey had come in early and got a pew next to the top almost. I stood outside. There was hardly a chance for anyone else to get in.

By-and-bye up comes old Jonathan, driving a respectable-looking carriage, with his wife and Bella and Maddie all in white silk and satin, and looking splendid. Out he gets, and takes Bella to walk up the middle of the church. When he went in with Bella, Maddie had one look in, and it seemed so crammed full of people that she looked frightened and drew back. Just then

up comes the Mr. Dawsons and Starlight, with the Commissioner and a few more.

Directly he sees Maddie draw back, Starlight takes the whole thing in, and walked forward.

"My dear young lady," says he, "will you permit me to escort you up the aisle? The bride appears to have preceded you."

He offered her his arm, and, if you'll believe me, the girl didn't know him a bit in the world, and stared at him like a perfect stranger.

"It's all right, Miss Maddie," says the Commissioner. He had a way of knowing all the girls, as far as a laugh or a bit of chaff went, especially if they were good-looking. "Mr. Lascelles is an English gentleman, newly arrived, and a friend of mine. He's anxious to learn Australian ways."

She took his arm then and walked on, never looking at him, but quite shy-like, till he whispered a word in her ear which brought more colour into her face than anyone had seen there before for a year.

"My word, Lascelles knows how to talk to 'em," says Jack Dawson. "He's given that girl a whip that makes her brighten up. What a chap he is; you can't lick him."

"Pretty fair all round, I should say," says the other brother, Bill. "Hullo! are we to go on the platform with the parson and the rest of 'em?"

The reason was that as we went up the church all together, all in a heap, with the Barneses and the bride, they thought we must be related to 'em; and the church being choke-full they shunted us on to the place inside the rails, where we found ourselves drafted into the small yard with the bridegroom, the bride, the parson, and all that mob.

There wasn't much time to spare, what with the racing and the general bustle of the day. The miners gave a sort of buzz of admiration as Bella and Maddie and the others came up the aisle. They looked very well, there's no manner of doubt. They were both tallish girls, slight, but well put together, and had straight features and big bright eyes, with plenty of fun and meaning in 'em. All they wanted was a little more colour like, and between the hurry for time and Bella getting married, a day's work that don't come often in anyone's life, and having about a thousand people to look at 'em, both the girls were flushed up a good deal. It set them off first-rate. I never saw either of them look so handsome before. Old Barnes had come down well for once, and they were dressed in real good style—hadn't overdone it neither.

When the tying-up fakement was over everything went off first-rate. The bridegroom was a hardy-looking, up-standing, young chap that looked as if work was no trouble to him. Next to a squatter I think a Government surveyor's the best billet going. He can change about from one end of the district to another. He has a good part of his time the regular free bush life, with his camp and his men, and the harder he works the more money he makes. Then when he comes back to town he can enjoy himself and no mistake. He is not tied to regular hours like other men in the service, and can go and come when he likes pretty well. Old Barnes would be able to give Bella and her sister a tidy bit of money some day, and if they took care they'd be comfortable enough off after a few years. He might have looked higher, but Bella would make any man she took to a slashing good wife, and so she did him. So the parson buckles them

to, and the last words were said. Starlight steps forward and says, "I believe it's the custom in all circles to salute the bride, which I now do," and he gave Bella a kiss before everyone in the most high and mighty and respectful manner, just as if he was a prince of the blood. At the same time he says, "I wish her every happiness and good fortune in her married life, and I beg of her to accept this trifling gift as a souvenir of the happy occasion." Then he pulls off a ring from his little finger and slips it on hers. The sun glittered on it for a moment. We could see the stones shine. It was a diamond ring, everyone could see. Then the Commissioner steps forward and begs to be permitted the same privilege, which made Bella laugh and blush a bit. Directly after Mr. Chanewood, who had stood quiet enough alongside of his wife, tucked her arm inside of his and walked away down the church, as if he thought this kind of thing was well enough in its way, but couldn't be allowed to last all day.

When they got into the carriage and drove off the whole church was cleared, and they got such a cheer as you might have heard at Tambaroora. The parson was the only living soul left near the building in five minutes. Everybody was in such a hurry to get back to the course and see the big race of the meeting.

Starlight slipped away in the crowd from his two friends, and managed to get a quiet few minutes with me and Gracey and Aileen; she was scolding him between jest and earnest for the kissing business, and said she thought he was going to leave off these sort of attentions to other girls.

"Not that she knew you at first, a bit in the world," Aileen said. "I watched her face pretty close, and I'm

sure she thought you were some grand gentleman, a friend of the Commissioner's and the Mr. Dawsons."

"My dearest girl," said he, "it was a promise I made months since that I should attend Bella's wedding, and I never break my word, as I hope you will find. These girls have been good friends and true to us in our need. We all owe them much. I don't suppose we shall cross each other's path again."

There wasn't much more time. We both had to move off. He had just time to catch his drag, and I had to get my horse. The Dawsons bullied him a bit for keeping them waiting, and swore he had stayed behind to flirt with some of the girls in the church after the wedding was over.

"You're not to be trusted when there's temptation going," Jack Dawson said. "Saw you talking to that Marston girl. If you don't mind you'll have your head knocked off. They're a rum lot to deal with, I can tell you."

"I must take care of myself," he said, laughing. "I have done so in other lands, and I suppose yours is no exception."

"This is a dashed queer country in some ways, and with deuced strange people in it, too, as you'll find by the time you've had your colonial experience," says Bill Dawson; "but there goes the saddling bell!"

The course had 20,000 people on it now if there was one. About a dozen horses stood stripped for the race, and the betting men were yelling out the odds as we got close enough to the stand to hear them. We had a good look at the lot. Three or four good-looking ones among them, and one or two flyers that had got in light as usual. Rainbow was nowhere about. Darkie was on the

card, but no one seemed to know where he was or anything about him. We expected he'd start at 20 to 1, but somehow it leaked out that he was entered by old Jacob Benton, and that acted as a damper on the layers of the odds. "Old Jake's generally there or thereabouts. If he's a duffer, it's the first one he's brought to the post. Why don't the old varmint show up?"

This was what I heard about and round, and we began to get uneasy ourselves, for fear that something might have happened to him or the horse. About 8 or 9 to 1 was all we could get, and that we took over and over again.

As the horses came up the straight, one after the other, having their pipe-openers, you'd have thought no race had been run that week, to see the interest all the people took in it. My word, Australia is a horsy country, and no mistake. With the exception of Arabia, perhaps, as they tell us about, I can't think as there's a country on the face of the earth where the people's fonder of horses. From the time they're able to walk, boys and girls, they're able to ride, and ride well. See the girls jump on bare-backed, with nothing but a gunny-bag under 'em, and ride over logs and stones, through scrub and forest, down gullies, or along the side of a mountain. And a horse race, don't they love it? Wouldn't they give their souls almost—and they do often enough—for a real flyer, a thoroughbred, able to run away from everything in a country race. The horse is a fatal animal to us natives, and many a man's ruin starts from a bit of horse-flesh not honestly come by.

But our racing ain't going forward, and the day's passing fast. As I said, everybody was looking at the horses—coming along with the rush of the thoroughbred

when he's "on his top" for condition; his coat like satin, and his legs like iron. There were lots of the bush girls on horseback, and among them I soon picked out Maddie Barnes. She was dressed in a handsome habit and hat. How she'd had time to put them on since the wedding I couldn't make out, but women manage to dress faster sometimes than others. She'd wasted no time anyhow.

She was mounted on a fine, tall, upstanding chestnut, and Joe Moreton was riding alongside of her on a good-looking bay, togged out very superior also. Maddie was in one of her larking humours, and gave Joe quite enough to do to keep time with her.

"I don't see my horse here yet," she says to Joe, loud enough for me to hear; but she knew enough not to talk to me or pretend to know me. "I want to back him for a fiver. I hope that old Jacob hasn't gone wrong."

"What do you call your horse?" says Joe. "I didn't know your father had one in this race."

"No fear," says Maddie; "only this horse was exercised for a bit near our place. He's a regular beauty, and there isn't a horse in this lot fit to see the way he goes."

"Who does he belong to?" says Joe.

"That's a secret at present," says she; "but you'll know some day, when you're a bit older, if you behave yourself. He's Mr. Jacob Benton's Darkie now, and you bet on him to the coat on your back."

"I'll see what I think of him first," says Joe, who didn't fancy having a horse rammed down his throat like that.

"If you don't like him you don't like me," says Maddie. "So mind that, Joe Moreton."

Just as she spoke there was a stir in the crowd, and

old Jacob came along across the course leading a horse with a sheet on, just as easy-going as if he'd a day to spare. One of the stewards rode up to him, and asked him what he meant by being so late.

The old chap pulls out his watch. "You'll stick to your advertised time, won't you? I've time to weigh, time to pull off this here sheet and my overcoat, time to mount, and a minute to spare. I never was late in my life, governor."

Most of the riding mob was down with the racehorses, a distance or so from the stand, where they was to start, the course being over two miles. So the weighing yard and stand was pretty well empty, which was just what old Jacob expected.

The old man walks over to the scales and has himself weighed all regular, declaring a pound overweight for fear of accidents. He gets down as quiet and easy as possible to the starting point, and just in time to walk up steadily with the other horses, when down goes the starter's flag, and "Off" was the word. Starlight and the Dawsons were down there waiting for him. As they went away one of the ring men says, "Ten to one against Darkie. I lay Darkie." "Done," says Starlight; "will you do it in tens?" "All right," says the "book." "I'll take you," says both the Dawsons, and he entered their names.

They'd taken all they could get the night before at the hotel; and as no one knew anything about Darkie, and he had top weight, he hadn't many backers.

CHAPTER XX.

MR. DAWSON drove pretty near the stand then, and they all stood up in the drag. I went back to Aileen and Gracey Storefield. We were close by the winning post when they came past; they had to go another time round.

The Sydney horses were first and second, the diggers' favourite third; but old Rainbow, lying well up, was coming through the ruck hard held and looking full of running. They passed close by us. What a sight it is to see a dozen blood horses in top condition come past you like a flash of lightning! How their hoofs thunder on the level turf! How the jockeys' silk jackets rustle in the wind they make! How muscle and sinew strain as they pretty near fly through the air! No wonder us young fellows, and the girls, too, feel it's worth a year of their lives to go to a good race. Yes, and will to the world's end. "Oh! you darling Rainbow," I heard Aileen say. "Are you going to win this race and triumph over all these grand horses? What a sight it will be! I didn't think I could have cared for a race so much."

It didn't seem hardly any time before they were half-way round again, and the struggle was on, in good downright earnest. One of the Sydney horses began to shake his tail. The other still kept the lead. Then the Turon favourite—a real game pebble of a little horse—began to show up.

"Hotspur, Hotspur! No. Bronzewing has it — Bronzewing. It's Bronzewing's race. Turon for ever!" the crowd kept yelling.

"Oh! look at Rainbow!" says Aileen. And just then at the turn, old Jacob sat down on him. The old horse

challenged Bronzewing, passed him, and collared Hotspur. "Darkie! Darkie!" shouts everybody. "No! Hotspur—Darkie's coming—Darkie—Darkie! I tell yer Darkie." And as old Jacob made one last effort, and landed him a winner by a clear head, there was a roar went up from the whole crowd that might have been heard at Nulla Mountain.

Starlight jumps off the drag and leads the old horse into the weighing yard. The steward says "Dismount." No fear of old Jacob getting down before he heard that. He takes his saddle in his lap and gets into the scales. "Weight," says the clerk. Then the old fellow mounts and rides past the judge's box. "I declare Mr. Benton's horse Darkie to be the winner of the Turon Grand Handicap, Bronzewing second horse, Hotspur third," says he.

Well, there was great cheering and hollering, though none knew exactly whose horse he was or anything about him; but an Australian crowd always likes to see the best horse win—and they like fair play—so Darkie was cheered over and over again, and old Jacob too.

Aileen stroked and petted him and patted his neck and rubbed his nose, and you'd raly thought the old horse knew her, he seemed so gentle-like. Then the Commissioner came down and said Mrs. Hautley, the police magistrate's wife, and some other ladies wanted to see the horse that had won the race. So he was taken over there and admired and stroked till old Jacob got quite crusty.

"It's an odd thing, Dawson," says the Commissioner, "nobody here knows this horse, where he was bred, or anything about him. Such a grand animal as he is, too! I wish Morringer could have seen him; he's always raving

about horses. How savage he'll be to have missed all the fun!"

"He's a horse you don't see every day," says Bill Dawson. "I'll give a couple of hundred for him right off."

"Not for sale at present," says old Jacob, looking like a cast-iron image. "I'll send ye word when he is."

"All right," says Mr. Dawson. "What a shoulder, what legs, what loins he has! Ah! well, he'll be weighted out now, and you will be glad to sell him soon."

"Our heads won't ache then," says Jacob, as he turns round and rides away.

"Very neat animal, shows form," drawls Starlight. "Worth three hundred in the shires for a hunter, if he can jump, perhaps more; but depends on his manners—must have manners in the hunting-field, Dawson, you know."

"Manners or not," says Bill Dawson, "it's my opinion he could have won that race in a canter. I must find out more about him and buy him if I can."

"I'll go you halves if you like," says Starlight. "I weally believe him to be a good animal."

Just then up rides Warrigal. He looks at the old horse as if he had never seen him before, nor us neither. He rides close by the heads of Mr. Dawson's team, and as he does so his hat falls off, by mistake, of course. He jumps off and picks it up, and rides slowly down towards the tent.

It was the signal to clear. Something was up.

I rode back to town with Aileen and Gracey; said good-bye—a hard matter it was, too—and sloped off to where my horse was, and was out of sight of Turon in twenty minutes.

Starlight hails a cabby (he told me this afterwards) and gets him to drive him over to the inn where he was staying, telling the Dawsons he'd have the wine put in ice for the dinner, that he wanted to send off a letter to Sydney by the post, and he'd be back on the course in an hour in good time for the last race.

In about half an hour back comes the same cabman and puts a note into Bill Dawson's hand. He looks at it, stares, swears a bit, and then crumples it up and puts it into his pocket.

Just as it was getting dark, and the last race just run, back comes Sir Ferdinand and all the police. They'd ridden hard, as their horses showed, and Sir Ferdinand (they say) didn't look half as good-natured as he generally did.

"You've lost a great meeting, Morringer," says the Commissioner. "Great pity you had to be off just when you did. But that's just like these infernal scoundrels of bushrangers. They always play up at the most inconvenient time. How did you get on with them?"

"Get on with them?" roars Sir Ferdinand, almost making a hole in his manners—he was that tired out and done he could hardly sit on his horse—"why, we've been sold as clean as a whistle. I believe some of the brutes have been here all the time."

"That's impossible," says the Commissioner. "There's been no one here that the police are acquainted with; not that I suppose Jackson and Murphy know many of the cross boys."

"No strange men nor horses, no disguises?" says Sir Ferdinand. Here he brings out a crumpled bit of paper, written on—

"If sur firdnand makes haist back heel be in time to see Starlite's Raneboe win the handy capp.

"BILLY THE BOY."

"I firmly believe that young scoundrel, who will be hanged yet, strung us on after Moran ever so far down south, just to leave the coast clear for the Marstons, and then sent me this, too late to be of any use."

"Quite likely. But the Marstons couldn't be here, let alone Starlight, unless—by Jove! but that's impossible. Impossible! Whew! Here, Jack Dawson, where's your Indian friend?"

"Gone back to the inn. Couldn't stand the course after the handicap. You're to dine with us, Commissioner; you too, Scott; kept a place, Sir Ferdinand, for you on the chance."

"One moment, pardon me. Who's your friend?"

"Name Lascelles. Just from home—came by India. Splendid fellow! Backed Darkie for the handicap—we did too—won a pot of money."

"What sort of a horse is this Darkie?"

"Very grand animal. Old fellow had him in a tent, about a mile down the creek; dark bay, star in forehead. Haven't seen such a horse for years. Like the old Emigrant lot."

Sir Ferdinand beckoned to a senior constable.

"There's a tent down there near the creek, I think you said, Dawson. Bring up the racehorse you find there, and anyone in charge."

"And now I think I'll drive in with you, Dawson" (dismounting, and handing his horse to a trooper). "I suppose a decent dinner will pick me up, though I feel just as much inclined to hang myself as do anything else

at present. I should like to meet this travelled friend of yours; strangers are most agreeable."

Sir Ferdinand was right in thinking it was hardly worth while going through the form of seeing whether we had waited for him. Lieutenant Lascelles, on leave from his regiment in India, had taken French leave. When inquiry was made at the hotel, where dinner had been ordered by Mr. Dawson and covers laid for a dozen, he had just stepped out. No one seemed to know exactly where to find him. The hotel people thought he was with the Mr. Dawsons, and they thought he was at the hotel. When they surrounded the tent, and then rushed it, all that it contained was the body of old Jacob Benton, lying dead drunk on the floor. A horse-rug was over him, his racing saddle under his head, and his pockets stuffed with five-pound notes. He had won his race and got his money, so he was not bound in honour to keep sober a minute longer.

Rainbow was gone, and there was nothing to be got out of him as to who had taken him or which way he had gone. Nobody seemed to have "dropped" to me. I might have stayed at Turon longer if I'd liked. But it wasn't good enough by a long way.

We rode away straight home, and didn't lose time on the road, you bet. Not out-and-out fast, either; there was no need for that. We had a clear two hours' start of the police, and their horses were pretty well knocked up by the pace they'd come home at, so they weren't likely to overhaul us easy.

It was a grand night, and, though we didn't feel up to much in the way of talking, it wasn't bad in its way. Starlight rode Rainbow, of course; and the old horse

sailed away as if a hundred miles or a thousand made no odds to him.

Warrigal led the way in front. He always went as straight as a line, just the same as if he'd had a compass in his forehead. We never had any bother about the road when he led the way.

"There's nothing like adventure," says Starlight, at last. "As someone says, who would have thought we should have come out so well? Fortune favours the brave, in a general way, there's no doubt. By George! what a comfort it was to feel one's self a gentleman again and to associate with one's equals. Ha! ha! how savage Sir Ferdinand is by this time, and the Commissioner! As for the Dawsons, they'll make a joke of it. Fancy my dining at the camp! It's about the best practical joke I ever carried out, and I've been in a good many."

"The luckiest turn we've ever had," says I. "I never expected to see Gracey and Aileen there, much less to go to a ball with them and no one to say no. It beats the world."

"It makes it all the rougher going back, that's the worst of it," says he. "Good God! what fools, idiots, raving lunatics, we've all been! Why, but for our own infernal folly, should we be forced to shun our fellow-men, and hide from the light like beasts of prey? What are we better? Better?—nay, a hundred times worse. Some day I shall shoot myself, I know I shall. What a muff Sir Ferdinand must be, he's missed me twice already."

Here he rode on, and never opened his mouth again till we began to rise the slope at the foot of Nulla Mountain. When the dark fit was on him it was no use talking to him. He'd either not seem to hear you, or else

he'd say something which made you sorry for opening your mouth at all. It gave us all we could do to keep along with him. He never seemed to look where he was going, and rode as if he had a spare neck at any rate. When we got near the pass to the mountain, I called out to him that he'd better pull up and get off. Do you think he'd stop or make a sign he heard me? Not a bit of it. He just started the old horse down when he came to the path in the cliff as if it was the easiest road in the world. He kept staring straight before him while the horse put down his feet, as if it was regular good fun treading up rugged sharp rocks and rolling stones, and turf wasn't worth going over. It seemed to me as if he wanted to kill himself for some reason or other. It would have been easy enough with some horses, but you could have ridden Rainbow down the roof of a house and jumped him into the front balcony, I firmly believe. You couldn't throw him down; if he'd dropped into a well he'd have gone in straight and landed on his legs.

Dad was glad enough to see us; he was almost civil, and when he heard that Rainbow had won the "big money" he laughed till I thought he'd do himself mischief, not being used to it. He made us tell him over again about Starlight and I going to the ball, and our seeing Aileen and Gracey there; and when he came to the part where Starlight made the bride a present of a diamond ring I thought he never would have done chuckling to himself. Even old Crib looked at me as if he didn't use to think me much of a fellow, but after this racket had changed his mind.

"Won't there be a jolly row in the papers when they get all these different characters played by one chap,

and that man the Captain?" says he. "I knew he was clever enough for anything; but this beats all. I don't believe now, Captain, you'll ever be took."

"Not alive!" says Starlight, rather grim and gloomy-looking; then he walks off by himself.

We stabled Rainbow, of course, for a week or two after this—being in training it wouldn't do to turn him out straight at once. Hardy as he was, no horse could stand that altogether; so we kept him under shelter in a roughish kind of a loose box we had knocked up, and fed him on bush hay. We had a small stack of that in case we wanted to keep a horse in—which we did sometimes. In the daytime he was loose in the yard. After a bit, when he was used to the weather, he was turned out again with his old mob, and was never a hair the worse of it. We took it easy ourselves, and sent out Warrigal for the letters and papers. We expected to knock a good bit of fun out of them when they came.

Sure enough, there was the deuce and all to pay when the big Sydney papers got hold of it, as well as the little *Turon Star* and the *Banner*.

"Was it true that the police had again been hoodwinked, justice derided, and the law set at defiance by a gang of ruffians who would have been run down in a fortnight had the police force been equal to the task entrusted to them? Was the moral sentiment of the country population so perverted, so obliterated, that robbers and murderers could find safe harbourage, trustworthy friends, and secret intelligence? Could they openly show themselves in places of public resort, mingle in amusements, and frequent the company of unblemished and distinguished citizens; and yet more, after this flagrant insult to the Government of the land, to every

sacred principle of law and order, they could disappear at will apparently invisible and invulnerable to the officers of the peace and the guardians of the public safety? It was incredible, it was monstrous, degrading, nay, intolerable, and a remedy would have to be found either in the reorganization of an inefficient police force or in the resignation of an incapable Ministry."

"Good for the *Sydney Monitor*," says Starlight; "that reporter knows how to double-shot his guns, and winds up with a broadside. Let us see what the *Star* says. I had a bet with the editor, and paid it, as it happened. Perhaps he'll temper justice with mercy. Now for a start:—

"That we have had strong casts from time to time and exciting performances at our local theatres, no one will deny; but perhaps the inhabitants of Turon never witnessed a more enthralling melodrama than was played during the first two days of our race meeting before a crowded and critical audience, and never, we can state from a somewhat extended experience of matters dramatic, did they gaze on a more finished actor than the gentleman who performed the leading part. Celebrated personages have ere now graced our provincial boards. On the occasion of the burning of the Theatre Royal in Sydney, we were favoured with the presence in our midst of artists who rarely, if ever before, had quitted the metropolitan stage. But our *jeune premier* in one sense has eclipsed every darling of the tragic or the comic muse.

"Where is there a member of the profession who could have sustained his part with faultless ease and self-possession, being the whole time aware of the fact that he smiled and conversed, danced and dined,

and slept (ye gods! did he sleep?), with a price upon his head—with the terrible doom of dishonour and inevitable death hanging over him, consequent upon a detection which might occur at any moment?

“‘Yet was there a stranger guest among us who did all this and more with unblenching brow, unruffled self-possession, unequalled courtesy, who, if discovered, would have been arrested and consigned to a lock-up, only to be exchanged for the gloom and the manacles of the condemned cell. He, indeed, after taking a prominent part in all the humours of the vast social gathering by which the Turon miners celebrated their annual games, disappeared with the almost magical mystery which has already marked his proceedings.

“‘Whom could we possibly allude to but the celebrated, the illustrious, we grieve to be compelled to add, the notorious Starlight, the hero of a hundred legends, the Australian Claude Duval?

“‘Yes, almost incredible as it may seem to our readers and persons at a distance imperfectly acquainted with exceptional phases of colonial life, the robber chief (and, for all we know, more than one of his aides-de-camp) was among us, foremost among the betting men, the observed of all observers in the grand stand, where, with those popular country gentlemen, the Messrs. Dawson, he cheered the winners in the two great races, both of which, with demoniac luck, he had backed heavily.

“‘We narrate as a plain, unvarnished truth that this accomplished and semi-historical personage raced a horse of his own, which turns out now to have been the famous Rainbow, an animal of such marvellous speed, courage, and endurance that as many legends are current about him as of Dick Turpin’s well-known steed. He attended

the marriage, in St. Matthew's Church, of Miss Isabel Barnes, the daughter of our respected neighbour, Mr. Jonathan Barnes, when he presented the bride with a costly and beautiful diamond ring, completing the round of his vagaries by dining on invitation with the Commissioner at the camp mess, and, with that high official, honouring our race ball with his presence, and sunning himself in the smiles of our fairest maidens.

“‘We are afraid that we shall have exhausted the fund of human credulity, and added a fresh and original chapter to those tales of mystery and imagination of which the late Edgar Allan Poe was so masterly a delineator.

“‘More familiarly rendered, it seems that the fascinating Captain Starlight—“as mild a mannered man” (like Lambre) “as ever scuttled a ship or cut a throat,” presented himself opportunely at one of the mountain hostelries, to the notice of our good-hearted squires of Wide-view, Messrs. William and John Dawson. One of their wheelers lay at the point of death—a horse of great value—when the agreeable stranger suggested a remedy which effected a sudden cure.

“‘With all their generous instincts stirred, the Messrs. Dawson invited the gentleman to take a seat in their well-appointed drag. He introduced himself as Mr. Lascelles, holding a commission in an Indian regiment of Irregular Horse, and now on leave, travelling chiefly for health.

“‘Just sufficiently sunburned, perfect in manner, full of information, humorous and original in conversation, and with all the *prestige* of the unknown, small wonder that “The Captain” was regarded as a prize, socially considered, and introduced right and left. Ha! ha!

What a most excellent jest, albeit rather keen, as far as Sir Ferdinand is concerned! We shall never, never cease to recall the humorous side of the whole affair. Why, we ourselves, our august editorial self, actually had a bet in the stand with the audacious pretender, and won it, too. Did he pay up? Of course he did. A "pony," to wit, and on the nail. He does nothing by halves, *notre capitaine*. We have been less promptly reimbursed, indeed, not paid at all, by gentlemen boasting a fairer record. How graciously he smiled and bowed as, with his primrose kid gloves, he disengaged the two tenners and a five-pound note from his well-filled receptacle.

"The last time we had seen him was in the dock at Roma, being tried in the great cattle case, that *cause célèbre*. To do him justice, he was quite as cool and unconcerned there, and looked as if he was doing the amateur casual business without ulterior liabilities.

"Adieu! fare thee well, Starlight, bold Rover of the Waste; we feel inclined to echo the lament of the ancient Lord Douglas:—

"'Tis pity of him, too," he cried;
"Bold can he speak, and fairly ride;
I warrant him a warrior tried."

It is in the interests of justice, doubtless, that thou be hunted down, and expiate by death-doom the crimes which thou and thy myrmidons have committed against society in the sight of God and man. But we cannot, for the life of us, take a keen interest in thy capture. We owe thee much, Starlight; many a slashing leader, many a spicy paragraph, many a stately reflection on contemporary morals hast thou furnished us with. Shall we haste to the slaughter of the rarest bird—golden ovaried? We trow not. Get thee to the wilderness, and repent

thee of thy sins. Why should we judge thee? Thou hast, if such dubious donation may avail, an editor's blessing. Depart, and "stick-up" no more.'"

"Well done, the *Turon Star*!" says Starlight, after he read it all out. "I call that very fair. There's a flavour of good feeling underneath much of that nonsense, as well as of porter and oysters. It does a fellow a deal more good than slanging him to believe that he's human after all, and that men think so."

"Do you reckon that chap was sober when he wrote that?" says father. "Blest if I can make head or tail of it. Half what them fellows puts down is regular rot. Why couldn't he have cut it a bit shorter, too?"

CHAPTER XXI.

"THE *Banner* comes next," says Starlight, tearing it open. "We shall have something short and sweet after the *Star*. How's this?"

"STARLIGHT AGAIN.

"This mercurial brigand, it would appear, has paid Turon another visit, but, with the exception of what may be considered the legalized robbery of the betting ring, has not levied contributions. Rather the other way, indeed. A haste note for Mr. Dawson, whom he had tricked into temporary association by adopting one of the disguises he can so wonderfully assume, requested that gentleman to receive the Handicap Stakes, won by his horse. Darkie, *alias* Rainbow, and to hand them over to the treasurer of the Turon Hospital, which was accordingly done.

"Sir Ferdinand and the police had been decoyed

away previously nearly 100 miles by false intelligence as to Moran and his gang. Our town and treasure were thus left undefended for forty-eight hours, while a daring criminal and his associates mingled unsuspected with all classes. We have always regarded the present system—facetiously called police protection—as a farce. This latter fiasco will probably confirm the idea with the public at large. We, unlike a contemporary, have no morbid sympathy with crime—embroidered or otherwise; our wishes, as loyal subjects, are confined to a short shrift and a high gallows for all who dare to obstruct the Queen's highway.' ”

“That's easy to understand, barrin' a word here and there,” says father, taking his pipe out of his mouth and laying it down; “that's the way they used to talk to us in the old days. Dashed if I don't think it's the best way after all. You know where you are. The rest's flummery. All on us as takes to the cross does it with our eyes open, and deserves all we gets.”

“I'm afraid you're right, governor; but why didn't these moral ideas occur to you, for instance, and others earlier in life?”

“Why?” says father, getting up and glaring with his eyes, “because I was a blind, ignorant dog when I was young, as had never been taught nothing, and knowed nothing, not so much as him there” (pointing to Crib), “for he knows what his business is, and I didn't. I was thrashed and starved, locked up in a gaol, chained and flogged after that, and half the time for doing what I didn't know was wrong, and couldn't know more than one of them four-year-old colts out there that knocks his head agin the yard when he's roped, and falls backards and breaks his neck if he ain't watched. Whose business

was it to have learned me better? That I can't rightly say, but it seemed it was the business of the Government people to gaol me, and iron me, and flog me. Was that justice? Any man's sense'll tell him it wasn't. It's been them and me for it since I got my liberty, and if I had had a dozen lives they'd all have gone the same road!"

We none of us felt in the humour to say much after that. Father had got into one of his tantrums, and when he did he was fit to be tied; only I'd not have took the contract for something. Whatever it was that had happened to him in the old times when he was a Government man he didn't talk about. Only every now and then he'd let out just as he did now, as if nothing could ever set him straight again, or keep him from fighting against them, as he called the swells and the Government, and everybody almost that was straightgoing and honest. He'd been at it a good many years, one way and another, and anyone that knew him didn't think it likely he'd change.

The next dust we got into was all along of a Mr. Knightley, who lived a good way down to the south, and it was one of the worst things we ever were mixed up in. After the Turon races and all that shine, somehow or other we found that things had been made hotter for us than ever since we first turned out. Go where we would, we found the police always quick on our trail, and we had two or three very close shaves of it. It looked as if our luck was dead out, and we began to think our chance of getting across the border to Queensland, and clear out of the colony that way, looked worse every day.

Dad kept foraging about to get information, and we

sent Warrigal and Billy the Boy all over the country to find out how it was things were turning out so contrary.

Sir Ferdinand was always on the move, but we knew he couldn't do it all himself unless he got the office from someone who knew the ropes better than he did.

Last of all we dropped on to it.

There was one of the goldfields commissioners, a Mr. Knightley, a very keen, cool hand; he was a great sporting man, and a dead shot, like Mr. Hamilton. Well, this gentleman took it into his head to put on extra steam and try and run us down. He'd lost some gold by us in the escort robbery, and not forgotten it; so it seems he'd been trying his best to fit us ever since. Just at first he wasn't able for much, but later on he managed to get information about us and our beat, whenever we left the Hollow, and he put two and two together, and very nearly dropped on us, as I said before, two or three times. We heard, too, that he should say he'd never rest till he had Starlight and the Marstons, and that if he could get picked police he'd bring us in within a month, dead or alive.

We didn't care much about blowing of this sort in a general way; but one of dad's telegraphs sent word in that Mr. Knightley had a couple of thousand pounds' worth of gold from a new diggings lodged at his private residence for a few days till he could get the escort to call for it; that there was only him and a German doctor, a great scholar he was, named Schiller, in the house.

Moran and Daly knew about this, and they were dead on for sticking up the place and getting hold of the gold. Besides that, we felt savage about his trying to run us in. Of course, it was his duty and that of all magistrates and commissioners in a general way. But he wasn't an

officer of police, and we thought he was going outside of his line. So when all came to all, we made up our minds to learn him a lesson to stick to his own work; besides, a thousand ounces of gold was no foolish touch, and we could kill two birds with one stone. Moran, Daly, and Joe Wall were to be in it besides. We didn't like working with them. Starlight and I were dead against it. But we knew they'd tackle it by themselves if we backed out. So we agreed to make one thing of it. We were to meet at a place about ten miles off and ride over there together.

Just about ten o'clock we closed in on the place, and left Billy the Boy and Warrigal with the horses, while we sneaked up. We couldn't get near, though, without his knowing it, for he always had a lot of sporting dogs—pointers, retrievers, kangaroo dogs, no end. They kicked up a deuce of a row, and barked and howled enough to raise the dead, before we got within a quarter of a mile from the house.

Of course he was on his guard then, and before long the bullets began to fly pretty thick among us, and we had to take cover to return fire and keep as dark as we could. No doubt this Dr. Schiller loaded the guns and handed them to him, else he couldn't have made such play as he did.

We blazed away too, and as there was no stable at the back we surrounded the house and tried hard to find an opening. Devil a chance there seemed to be; none of us dared show. So sure as we did we could hear one of those Winchester rifle bullets sing through the air, almost on the top of us. We all had a close shave more than once for being too fast.

For more than half the night he kept cannonading

away, and we didn't seem able to get any nearer the place. At last we drew lots which should try and get up close to the place, so as to make a rush while we poured in our broadside and open a door to let us in.

The lot fell upon Patsey Daly. "Good-bye, all," he said. "I'm dashed if I don't think Knightley will bag me. I don't half like charging him, and that's God's truth. Anyhow I'll try for that barrel there; and if I get behind it I can fire from short range and make him come out."

He made a rush, half on his hands and knees, and managed to get behind this barrel, where he was safe from being hit as long as he kept well behind it. Then he peppered away, right and left.

On the left of the verandah there was a door stood partly open, and after a bit a man in a light overcoat and a white hat, like Mr. Knightley always wore, showed himself for a second. Daly raps away at this, and the man staggers and falls. Patsey shows himself for a moment from behind the cask, thinking to make a rush forward; that minute Mr. Knightley, who was watching him from a window (the other was only an image), lets drive at him, cool and steady, and poor Patsey drops like a cock, and never raised his head again. He was shot through the body. He lingered a bit; but in less than an hour he was a dead man.

We began to think at last that we had got in for a hot thing, and that we should have to drop it like Moran's mob at Kadombla. However, Starlight was one of those men that won't be beat, and he kept getting more and more determined to score. He crept away to the back of the building, where he could see to fire at a top window close by where the doctor and Mr. Knightley had been potting at us.

He had the repeating rifle he'd won from me; he never let it go afterwards, and he could make wonderful shooting with it. He kept it going so lively that they began to be hard pressed inside, and had to fire away twice as much ammunition as they otherwise would. It always beat me how they contrived to defend so many points at once. We tried back and front, doors and windows. Twenty times we tried a rush, but they were always ready—so it seemed—and their fire was too hot for us to stand up to, unless we wanted to lose every second man.

The shooting was very close. Nearly every one of us had a scratch—Starlight rather the worst, as he was more in the front and showed himself more. His left arm was bleeding pretty free, but he tied a handkerchief over it and went on as if nothing had happened, only I could see that his face had that set look he only got now and then, and his eyes began to show out a fierce light.

At last we began to see that the return fire was slackening off, while ours was as brisk as ever.

“Hurrah!” says Starlight, “I believe they’ll give in soon. If they had any cartridges they would have had every man of us in that last rush. Let’s try another dodge. Here goes for a battering-ram, Dick!”

He pointed to a long, heavy sapling which had been fetched in for a sleeper or something of that sort. We picked it up, and, taking a run back, brought it with all its weight against the front door. In it went like a sheet of bark; we almost fell as we ran forward and found ourselves, in a big, dark hall. It seemed very queer and strange, everything was so silent and quiet.

We half expected another volley. But nothing came. We could only stand and wait. The others had gone round the side of the house.

"Get to a corner, Dick; they're always the safest places. We must mind it isn't an ambush. What the devil's the matter? Are they going to suicide, like the people in the round tower of Jhansi?"

"There are no women here," I said. "There's no saying what Mr. Knightley might do if his wife had been here."

"Thank God, she's away at Bathurst," said Starlight. "I hate seeing women put out. Besides, everybody bows down to Mrs. Knightley. She's as good as she's handsome, I believe, and that's saying a great deal."

Just then Moran and Wall managed to find their way into the other side of the house, and they came tearing into the hall like a pair of colts. They looked rather queer when they saw us three and no one else.

"What in thunder's up?" says Moran. "Are they all gone to bed, and left us the spare rooms? Poor Patsey won't want one, anyhow."

"Better make some search upstairs," says Starlight. "Who'll go first? You make a start, Moran; you like fighting people."

"Couldn't think of going before the Captain," says Moran, with a grin. "I'll follow where you lead."

"All right!" says Starlight; "here goes," and he started to walk upstairs, when all of a sudden he stopped and looked up as if something had surprised him above a bit. Then he stepped back and waited. I noticed he took off his hat and leaned against the wall.

It was an old-fashioned house for that part of the world, built a good many years ago by a rich settler, who was once the owner of all that side of the country. The staircase was all stone, ornamented every way it could be. Three or four people could walk abreast easy enough.

Just about half-way up was a broad landing, and on this, all of a sudden, appeared four people, inclined by their ways to come down to where we were, while we were all wondering, for a reason you'll see afterwards.

It was Mr. Knightley who took the lady's arm—it was his wife, and she had been there all the time, firing at us as like as not, or at any rate helping. The others followed, and they all walked quite solemn and steady-like down the stairs together.

It was a strange sight. There we were standing and leaning about the dark hall, staring and wondering, and these people walking down to meet us like ghosts, without speaking or anything else.

Mr. Knightley was a tall, handsome man, with a grand black beard that came down to his chest. He walked like a lord, and had that kind of manner with him that comes to people that have always been used to be waited on and have everything found for them in this world. As for his wife, she was given in to be the handsomest woman in the whole country side—tall and graceful, with a beautiful smile, and soft fair hair. Everybody liked and respected her, gentle and simple—everybody had a good word for her. You couldn't have got anyone to say different for a hundred pounds. There are some people, here and there, like this among the gentlefolk, and, say what you like, it does more to make coves like us look a little closer at things and keep away from what's wrong and bad than all the parsons' talk twice over. Mrs. Knightley was the only woman that ever put me in mind of Miss Falkland, and I can't say more than that.

So, as I said before, it was quite a picture to see them walk slowly and proudly down and sweep into the hall as if they'd been marching into a ball-room. We

had both seen them at the ball at the Turon, and everybody agreed they were the handsomest couple there.

Now they were entering their own hall in a different way. But you couldn't have told much of what they felt by their faces. He was a proud man, and felt bitterly enough that he had to surrender to a gang of men that he hated and despised, that he'd boasted he could run down and capture in a month. Now the tables were turned. He and his beautiful wife were in our power, and, to make matters worse, one of our band lay dead, beside the inner wall, killed by his hand.

What was to be his doom? And who could say how such a play might end?

I looked at our men. As they stepped on to the floor of the hall and looked round Mrs. Knightley smiled. She looked to me like an angel from heaven that had come by chance into the other place and hadn't found out her mistake. I saw Starlight start as he looked at her. He was still leaning against the wall, and there was a soft, sorrowful look in his eyes, like I remember noticing once before while he was talking to Aileen about his early days, a thing he never did but once. Part of her hair had straggled down, and hung in a sort of ringlet by her face. It was pale, but clear and bright-looking, and there was a thin streak of blood across her forehead that showed as she came underneath the lamp light from the landing above.

I looked over at Moran. He and Wall sat in a corner, looking as grim and savage as possible, while his deadly black eyes had a kind of gloomy fire in them that made him look like a wild beast in a cage.

Mr. Knightley was a man that always had the first word in everything, and generally the best of an argu-

ment—putting down anybody who differed from him in a quiet, superior sort of way.

He began now. “Well, my men, I have come down to surrender, and I’m sorry to be obliged to do so. But we have fired our last cartridge—the doctor thought we had a thousand left—in which case, I may as well tell you, you’d never have had this pleasure. Captain Starlight, I surrender my sword—or should do so if I had one. We trust to receive honourable treatment at your hands.”

“I’m sure the Captain will never permit any harm to come to me,” says Mrs. Knightley, with a look in her eyes that, in spite of herself, said a deal more than words. “Why, I danced *vis-à-vis* to him in a quadrille at the Turon ball.”

“I shall never forget the honour,” says Starlight, walking forward and bowing low. “Permit me to offer you a chair, madam; you look faint.”

As he did so she sank down in it, and really looked as if she would faint away. It wouldn’t have been much wonder if she had after what she’d gone through that night.

Then Mr. Knightley began again. He wanted to know how he stood. He didn’t like the look of Moran and Wall—they were a deal too quiet for him, and he could read men’s faces like a book. The other two prisoners were the German Doctor Schiller—a plucky old chap, who’d been a rebel and a conspirator and I don’t know what all in his own country. He’d seen too much of that kind of thing to trouble himself overmuch about a trifle of this kind. The old woman was a family servant, who had been with them for years and years. She was a kind of worshipper of theirs, and was ready to live or die with her mistress.

CHAPTER XXII.

So Mr. Knightley stood up and faced them all like a man. He was one of those chaps that makes up their mind pretty quick about the sort of people they've got to deal with, and if there's anything to be said or done lets 'em have it "straight from the shoulder." As he stood there—straight and square—with his head thrown back, and his eyes—very bright and sharp they were—looking every man's face over as if he was reading a notice and had no time to spare, you couldn't have told, from his look, or voice, or manner, whether he was afraid that things would go wrong, or whether he was dead sure they'd go right. Some men are like that. Others you can tell every thought that's passing through their minds just as if it was printed in big letters on their breasts, like a handbill: "£200 reward," and so on.

Well, Mr. Knightley wasn't one of that sort, though I saw him keep his eye a trifle longer on Moran than the rest of 'em.

"Now then, boys," he says, "we've had our flutter out. I've done my best, and you've done yours. I've bagged one of your lot, and you've done your best to pot me. See here," and he lifts up the collar of his coat and shows a hole through it, touches his head on the side, and brings away a red mark; and takes out his watch with the case all battered in by a revolver bullet. "You can't say I hadn't cause to show fight," and he points to his wife. "Where's the man among you that wouldn't have done the same? An Englishman's house is his castle. What am I to expect?"

He looked over at Starlight, but he didn't take no notice, and made no sign. I saw Mrs. Knightley look

over at him too. It was the first time I ever seen him look hard when there was a woman in the case, and such a one! But he kept his face set and sternlike.

Then Moran breaks in—

“Expect be blowed! What the——do you expect now we’ve got yer to rights; are we going to let you off after knocking over Daly? No dashed fear, mister, we’ll serve you the same way as you served him, as soon as we’ve had some grub and another glass or two of your grog. You’ve got some fairish stuff here.”

“Why, Moran,” says Mr. Knightley, still making believe to joke—and, by George! if he could laugh then, he could sing a song with a bullet through him—“you’re getting bad-tempered since you used to be horsebreaking for Mr. Lowe. Don’t you remember that chestnut Sir Henry colt that no one else could ride, and I backed you not to get thrown, and won a fiver? But I’m a man of the world and know how to play a losing game at billiards as well as most men. Look here now! Daly’s dead. We can’t bring him to life again, can we? If you shoot me, you’ll be nothing to the good, and have every spare man in the three colonies at your heels. This is a game of brag, though the stakes are high. I’ll play a card. Listen. You shall have 100 fivers—£500 in notes—by to-morrow at four o’clock, if you’ll let Mrs. Knightley and the Doctor ride to Bathurst for the money. What do you say?”

“Damn you and your money too,” growled Moran. “We’ll have your blood, and nothing else. D’ye hear that? You’re a dead man now; if you’re not buried by this time to-morrow, it won’t be because you’re not as ready for it as Patsey is.”

I saw Mrs. Knightley turn round and clasp her hands;

her face grew as white as death, but she said nothing, only looked over at Starlight, and her eyes grew bigger and bigger, while her mouth trembled just the least bit.

"You're off your head, Moran," says Mr. Knightley, pulling out a cigar and lighting it. "But I suppose you're the chief man, and all the rest must do as you tell them."

"Suppose we talk it over," says Starlight, very quiet, but I knew by the first word that he spoke something was coming. "Daly dropped, and it can't be helped. Accidents will happen. If you play at bowls you must take rubbers. It has been a fair fight; no one can say otherwise. Let us put it to the vote. I propose that Mr. Knightley's offer be accepted. Not that I intend to take a shilling of the money."

"Nor me either," says I. "So you three chaps will have it to share between you. I don't see that we can do better. A fight's a fight, and if Patsey got his gruel it might have happened to Mr. Knightley himself. As for shooting in cold blood, I'm not on, and so I tell you."

"I suppose you think you and Starlight's going to boss the lot of us, because you've been doing it fine at the Turon races along with a lot of blasted swells as 'ud scrag us if they had the chance, and we're to take so much a head for our dashed lives, because we're only working chaps. Not if Dan Moran knows it. What we want is satisfaction—blood for blood—and we're a-goin' to have it, eh, mates?"

Wall and Hulbert hadn't said anything before this. They were not bad chaps underneath, but Moran was such a devil when he was raised that they didn't like to cross him. Besides, they had a down on Mr. Knightley, and wanted to sheet it home to him somehow. They had

got to the brandy, too, and it didn't make matters any better, you take my word for it.

Starlight didn't speak for a minute or two. I couldn't think what he was at. If Jim had been there we should have been right, three to three. Now we were two to three. I knew Starlight had a good card to play, and was ready to play it, but he was waiting on the deal. Mr. Knightley must have had some sort of notion of the hand; he was wonderful quick at picking up the points of the game.

He said nothing, and looked as cool as you please, smoking his cigar as if he had nothing on his mind and wanted a rest. The lady sat quite still and pale, but her beautiful eyes kept wandering round from one to another, like some pretty creature caught in a trap. Dr. Schiller found it hard lines on him to keep quiet all this time—he couldn't hold it in no longer.

“Good heafens!” he says, “are you men, and will not say nodings when you haf such an ovver as dis? Subbose you shood us all, what then? Will not the whole coundry rice and hund you down like mat docks?”

“That won't make it any better for you, mate,” says Moran, with a grin. “When you and he's lying under that old tree outside, it'll make no odds to yer whether our rope's a long or a short 'un.”

“Quite right, Moran,” says Mr. Knightley. “Doctor, he has you there.”

Starlight moved a step or two over towards him, as if he was uncertain in his mind. Then he says to Wall and Hulbert—

“See here, men; you've heard what Moran says, and what I think. Which are you going to do? To help in a brutal, cowardly murder, and never be able to look a

man in the face again, or to take this money to-morrow? —a hundred and seventy each in notes, mind, and get away quietly—or are you going to be led by Moran, and told what you are to do like children?”

“Oh! come, Dan, let’s take the stuff,” says Wall. “I think it’s good enough. What’s the use of being contrary? I think the Captain’s right. He knows a dashed sight more than us.”

“He be hanged!” says Moran, with eyes glaring and the whole of his face working like a man in a fit. “He’s no Captain of mine, and never was. I’ll never stir from here till I have payment in blood for Daly’s life. We may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. I’ve sworn to have that man’s life to-night, and have it I will.”

“You’ll have ours first, you bloodthirsty, murdering dog,” says Starlight; and, as he spoke, he slipped his revolver into Mr. Knightley’s hand, who covered Moran that moment. I drew mine, too, and had Wall under aim. Starlight’s repeating rifle was up like lightning.

Mrs. Knightley covered her eyes, the old woman screamed, and the doctor sat down on a chair and puffed away at his meerschaum pipe.

“We’re three to three, now,” says Starlight; “you’ve only to move a finger and you’re a dead man. Wall and Hulbert can have a hand in it if they haven’t had shooting enough for one evening. Do your worst, you black-hearted brute! I’ve two minds to take you and run you in myself, if it’s only to give you a lesson in manners.”

Moran’s face grew as black as an ironbark tree after a bush fire. He raised his revolver, and in one second we should have been in the middle of a desperate hand-to-hand fight; and God knows how it might have ended hadn’t Hulbert struck up his arm, and spoke out like a man.

"It's no use, Dan, we won't stand it. You're a dashed fool and want to spoil everything for a bit of temper. We'll take the notes and let Mrs. Knightley and the doctor clear out for Bathurst if you'll say honour bright that you'll be at the Black Stump by to-morrow evening at five, and won't give the police the office."

Moran, slow and sulkily, put down his hand and glared round like a dingo with the dogs round him—as if he didn't know which to snap at first. Then he looked at Mr. Knightley with a look of hellish rage and spite that ten devils couldn't have improved upon, and, throwing himself down on a chair, drank off half a tumbler of brandy.

"Settle it amongst yourselves, and be —— to you," he said. "You're all agin me now; but, by ——, I'll be square with some of ye yet."

It was all over now. Mr. Knightley took a match out of the silver match-box at his watch-chain, and lit another cigar. I saw the tears trickling through Mrs. Knightley's fingers. Then she turned away her head, and after a minute or two was as calm and quiet as ever.

"You know your way about the place, Wall," says Mr. Knightley, as if he was in his own house, just the same as usual; "run up the horses, there's a good fellow; they're in the little horse paddock. Mrs. Knightley's is a gray, and the doctor's is a mouse-coloured mare with a short tail; you can't mistake them. The sooner they're off the sooner you'll handle the cash."

Wall looked rather amused, but went out, and we heard him rattle off to go round the paddock. The doctor went upstairs, and buckled on a long-necked pair of old-fashioned spurs, and Mrs. Knightley walked away

like a woman in a dream to her own room, and soon afterwards returned in her riding-habit and hat.

I foraged about and found the side-saddle and bridle in the harness-room. Everything was in tip-top order there—glass sides for keeping the dust off the four-in-hand harness and all that kind of thing. All the bits and stirrup-irons like silver. There wasn't much time lost in saddling-up, you bet!

We watched pretty close lest Moran should take a new fancy into his head, but he stuck to the brandy bottle, and very soon put himself from fighting or anything else. I wasn't sorry to see it. I was well aware he was as treacherous as a dingo, and could sham dead or anything else to gain his ends and throw people off their guards.

Well, the horses were brought out, and when Mr. Knightley lifted his wife up on to her saddle on the high-crested gray thoroughbred with a dash of Arab blood from an old Satellite strain, I guess he was never better pleased with anything in the world. They looked in each other's eyes for a minute, and then the old horse started off along the road to Bathurst with his fast, springy walk. Starlight took off his hat and bowed low in the most respectful way. Mrs. Knightley turned in her saddle and tried to say something, but the words wouldn't come—she could only wave her hand—and then her head went down nearly to her saddle. The doctor scrambled on to his horse's back, and trotted off after her. The gray moved off, shaking his head, at a beautiful, easy, springy canter. We raised a cheer, and they swept round a corner of the road and out of sight.

"You'll find these rather good, Captain," says Mr. Knightley, handing Starlight his cigar-case. "There's a

box upstairs in my dressing-room. If you'll allow me I'll order in dinner. There ought to be something decent if my old cook hasn't been frightened out of his life, but I think he has seen too much to be put out of his way by a little shooting."

"Now I think of it," says Starlight, "I do really feel disposed for refreshment. I say, Wall, see if you can't get that ferocious friend of yours into a room where he can sleep off his liquor. I really must apologize for his bad manners; but you see how the case stands."

"Perfectly, my dear fellow," says Mr. Knightley. "Don't mention it. I shall always feel personally indebted to you for far more than I can express. But let that pass for the present. What shall we do to pass the evening? You play picquet and hazard, of course?"

"Do I not," says Starlight, his eyes lighting up in a way I didn't remember. "It's many a day since I've met with anyone near my old form."

"Then suppose we have a game or two," says Mr. Knightley, "after dinner or supper, whichever we choose to call it. I have cards; they luckily came up the other day. In the meantime you will find the claret very fair, and this cold wild turkey—I shot a brace last Thursday—is not to be despised."

We had a rattling good feed, and no mistake, whatever it was. The turkey was a grand bird, and weighed 21lb., he told us. The cook had sent in some hot potatoes, and chaps like us that had been riding, walking, and fighting for twenty hours right on end had just the sort of appetite that a bird of that kind deserved. He was as fat as butter, too. They feed on dandelion seeds at that time of the year. It gives 'em a sort of gamy flavour such as no other bird, wild or tame, has. To my

liking the wild turkey beats the black duck even. He's the best game bird that flies in the bush.

Mr. Knightley, too, now his wife was safe on her way to Bathurst, and things seemed going well, was full of fun, and kept us all going. He helped everybody twice over, and wouldn't hear of anyone keeping the bottle standing. The night was close rather, and we were all that thirsty it went down like mother's milk. Wall and Hulbert got pleasant enough and joined in, now that Moran was out of the way. He was snoring in a back room, and, like a man in the dead-house of a bush shanty, not likely to wake before sunrise. Mr. Knightley told us some out-and-out good yarns, and Hulbert and Wall swore that if they'd known he was such a good sort they'd never have thought of sticking up the place. He said he had been quite mistaken about them, and that another time he should know better than to volunteer for work that was not part of his duty. By that time the claret had gone round pretty often; and without being screwed we'd all had our tongues loosened a bit.

After that we lit our pipes, and we three began to play all-fours and euchre, sometimes one pair, sometimes another. As for Mr. Knightley and Starlight, they got out a curious filigree sort of a little card-table and began to play some outlandish game that I didn't know, and to look very serious over it.

They had notes for counters, and I could see, as I looked over every now and then, that each man was doing all he knew to best the other. Sometimes one had the show; sometimes the other. We got tired and had another smoke and turned in. The beds were snug and comfortable. Mr. Knightley showed us where to go, and we wanted a good night's rest bad enough.

Just before I turned in I went up to the table. They looked as keen at it as if they'd just began, and I heard Starlight say, "I owe you 100 now. I'll play you double or quits." So I left them to it. I could see they were not on for bed just then. Both men were cool enough, but I could see that Starlight (and I'd never known him touch a card before) was one of those men that would never rise from the table as long as he had a shilling left, and would stake everything he had in the world upon the turn of a card.

We all slept sound, but most of us were up at sunrise. It doesn't do for chaps in our line to be caught napping, and the police might have got wind where we were at work. We had our horses to look to, and to give a look round in a general way to see if things were right.

Starlight and Mr. Knightley didn't turn out, they took it easy, perhaps they'd been up later than us; anyhow, they didn't show till breakfast, when they both made pretty fair time over the eatables.

My word! it was a breakfast, though we'd got a bit tired waiting for it. The old cook had hashed up the turkey; it was stunning, almost better than the day before. Then bacon and eggs, grilled steak, fresh bread and butter, coffee and tea, watercresses. Really, I thought we never should stop. It was lucky the police didn't come, or we shouldn't have done much in the fighting line, or the runaway either. As it turned out, Sir Ferdinand wasn't so very far off the line, but he took another road. He never had any luck somehow in following us up, though he had some first-rate chances. Moran was off his feed, and wouldn't come in. He took a nip and walked down to the creek. We were all glad enough to get shut of him.

After breakfast and a turn round the stables, blest if Starlight and Mr. Knightley didn't have out the cards again, and at it they went as fresh and keen as ever. We didn't know what in the world to do with ourselves till it was time to start to ride out to the Black Stump, where we were to meet the doctor and collar the £500. They didn't waste a minute of their time, till about half-past twelve Starlight puts down his cards very gently, and, says he—

“I'm afraid we have no more time to spare. I've enjoyed the play more than I have done anything for years. I leave you £100 now in notes, and you must take my I.O.U. for the balance. What bank shall I pay it into?”

“The Australian,” says Mr. Knightley. “At your convenience, of course.”

“Within a month,” says Starlight, bowing. “And now a glass of wine and a biscuit, it's time to be off.”

We had something as good, nearer the mark than that, and Moran sat down, too, and played a good knife and fork. He'd come to, after his booze, and was ready for any fresh villainy, as usual. He didn't let on to be nasty, but he looked sulky enough, and I saw his eye fixed on Mr. Knightley and Starlight now and then as if he'd have given a good deal to have had them where they hadn't so many at their backs.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WE ate well and drank better still at the lunch, although we had such a regular tuck-out at breakfast time. Mr. Knightley wouldn't hear of any of us shirking

our liquor, and by the time we'd done all hands were pretty well on. Moran himself began to look pleasant, or as good a sample of it as I'd ever seen in him. Mr. Knightley could get round the devil himself, I believe. I never saw his equals at that business; and this particular time he was in great feather, seeing that he was likely to get out of an ugly business all right. He was as sure of the £500 in notes being there at the appointed hour as he was of the sun setting that particular evening.

"I think it's a fair thing," says Starlight at last, looking at his watch. Mr. Knightley wasn't the first to speak, no fear. "Take us all our time to get to the Black Stump. We shall have to ride, too." Moran and Wall got up and fetched their horses. Mr. Knightley's was led up by one of his men. He was a big handsome roan, in top condition, and the man was riding a black horse with a tan muzzle that looked a trifle better, if anything. Mr. Knightley turned out in boots and breeches, with a gold fox's head on his scarf, swell hunting fashion, as they do it at home, Starlight said.

When Starlight's horse came up he was as lame as a tree, couldn't put his foot to the ground; got a kick or a strain, or trod on a glass bottle or something. Anyhow he had only three legs that he could rise a move out of. Starlight looked rather glum. He wasn't his second best or his third best either. All the same, a horse is a horse, and I never saw the man yet that a lame horse didn't put out a bit.

"Confound it," says he, "what a nuisance! It's just the way with these infernal half-bred brutes; they always let me down at the wrong time."

"Look here, old fellow," says Mr. Knightley, "leave him behind and take this black horse the boy's on; he's

one of the finest hacks you ever crossed. I refused sixty guineas for him the other day from Morringer."

"Thanks, very much," says Starlight, brightening up a bit; "but I hardly like to deprive you of him. Won't you want him yourself?"

"Oh, I can manage without him," says Mr. Knightley. "I'll let you have him for fifty and allow you ten pounds for your screw. You can add it on to your I.O.U., and pay it in with the other."

We all laughed at this, and Moran said if he was dealing with Mr. Knightley he'd get him a pound or two cheaper. But Starlight said, very serious-like, that the arrangement would suit him very well. So he had his saddle shifted, and the groom led back the bay and turned him loose in the paddock.

We mounted then, and it looked as if we were all matched for a race to the Black Stump. Moran had a good horse, and when he set him going in the first bit of thick timber we came to it took a man, I tell you, to keep him in sight. Starlight made the black horse hit out in a way that must have been a trifle strange to him unless he'd been in training lately. As for Mr. Knightley, he took it easy and sailed away on one side with Joe Wall and me. He played it out cool to the last, and wasn't going to hurry himself for anybody.

Half-an-hour before sundown we rode up to the Black Stump. It was a rum-looking spot, but everybody knew it for miles round. There was nothing like it anywhere handy. It was within a reasonable distance of Bathurst, and not so far from a place we could make to, where there was good shelter and hiding too, if we were pushed.

There were two or three roads led up to it, and crossed there—one from Bathurst, one to Turon, and another

straight into the forest country, which led range by range to Nulla Mountain. We could see on a good way ahead, and, though there was no one at the tree when we came, a single horseman was riding along the road for Bathurst. We all drew rein round the stump. It had been a tremendous big old ironbark tree—nobody knew how old, but it had had its top blown off in a thunderstorm, and the carriers had lighted so many fires against the roots of it that it had been killed at last, and the sides were as black as a steamer's funnel. After a bit we could make out the doctor's short-tailed, mousy mare and him powdering along at a sort of hand gallop.

When he came up close, he took off his hat and made a bow. "Chentlemen of the roat, I salude you," he says. "You haf kebt your bromise to the letter and you will fint that Albert von Schiller has kept his. Hauptmann!" says he to Starlight, "I delifer to you the ransom of dies wothy chentleman and his most excellend and hoch-besahltes laty, who has much recovered from her fadigues, and I demant his freetom."

"Well done, most trust-repaying and not-ever-to-be-entirely-forgotten herald," says Starlight. "I hand over to these worthy free companions the frank-geld; isn't that the term?—and when they have counted it (for they won't take your word or mine), the Graf here—most-highborn and high-beseeming, but uncommonly-near-ending his glorious career magnate—will be restored to you. Very pleasant company we've found him. I should like to have my revenge at picquet, that's all."

While this was going on Starlight had collared the bundle of notes from the doctor, and chucked it over quite careless-like to Moran. "There it is for you," says

he. "You can divide it between you. Dick and I stand out this time; and you can't say you've done badly."

Moran didn't say anything, but he and Wall got off their horses and sat down on their heels—native fashion. Then they turned to, counting out the notes one by one. They were all fivers—so it took some time—as they neither of 'em weren't very smart at figures, and after they'd got out 20 or 30 they'd get boxed, like a new hand counting sheep, and have to begin all over again. It must have been aggravating to Mr. Knightley, and he was waiting to be let go, in a manner of speaking. He never showed it, but kept smoking and yarning with Starlight, pointing out how grand the sun was just a-setting on the Bulga Mountains—just for all the world as if he'd given a picnic, and was making himself pleasant to the people that stayed longest.

At long last they'd got to the end of the conning, and divided the notes. Moran tied his up in a bunch, and rolled 'em in his poncho; but Wall crammed his into his pocket and made 'em all stick out like a boy that's been stealing apples. When they mounted their horses, Mr. Knightley shook hands with me and Starlight. Then he turns round to Moran and Wall—"We're parting good friends after all's said and done," he says. "Just as well matters have been settled this way. Come, now, in cool blood, ain't you rather glad, Moran?"

"Dashed if I know," growls he. "All I know is, you're deuced well out of it; your luck mayn't be so good another time."

"Nor yours either, my friend," says Mr. Knightley, drawing up his bridle-rein. "I had only a snap-shot at you when that bullet went through your poncho, or you'd be lying alongside of Daly. However, I needn't waste

my breath talking to that brute," he says to Starlight. "I know well all I owe to you and Dick Marston here. Some day I may repay it."

"You mean what I owe you," says Starlight, turning it off with a laugh. "Never fear, you'll find that paid to your credit in the bank. We have agents in all sorts of places. Good-bye, and a safe ride home. My respectful compliments to Mrs. Knightley. Perhaps you'd better follow the doctor now." The old gentleman had got tired waiting, and ridden on slow and easy.

Two or three weeks after, Starlight and I were taking a ride towards the Bogan Road, not that we was on for anything particular, but just having a turn round for want of something else to do, when we saw a big mob of cattle coming along, with three or four stock-riders behind 'em. Then we met a loaded dray and team in front, that had rations and swags and a tent. The driver asked us if we knew a good place to camp. He was a talking sort of chap, and we yarned away with him for a bit. He told us how the boss was behind in a dog-cart and tandem, with two led horses besides. The cattle were going to take up a new run he'd bought on the Lower Bogan, an out-and-out wild place; but he'd got the country cheap, and thought it would pay in the end. He was going ahead after a stage or two, but just now he was camping with them.

"My word, he's well in, is the cove," says the horse-driver; "he's got half-a-dozen stations besides this one. He'll be one of the richest men in Australia yet."

After we saw the cattle (about a thousand head) we thought it would be a middling day's work to "stick up" the cove and put him through. Going to form a new station, he'd very like have cash about, as he'd have to

pay for a lot of things on the nail just at first. If he was such a swell, too, he'd have a gold watch and perhaps a few more trifles. Anyhow, he was good for the day's expenses, and we thought we'd try it on.

So we passed the cattle and rode quietly along the road till we saw his dog-cart coming; then we stopped inside a yarran scrub, just as he came by—a square-built man he seemed to be, muffled up in a big rough coat. It was a cool morning. We rode up sharpish, and showed our revolvers, singing out to him to “bail up.” He pulled up quick and stared at us. So we did at him. Then the three of us burst out laughing—regular roared again.

Who should it be but old George Storefield.

“Well, this is a prime joke,” says he. “I knew you were out somewhere on this road; but I never thought I should live to be stuck up by you, Dick Marston.”

I looked foolish. It was rather a stunner when you come to think of it.

“I beg a thousand pardons,” says Starlight. “Ridiculous mistake. Want of something to occupy our time. ‘For Satan finds some mischief still,’ &c. Isn't that the way the hymn runs? Wonderfully true, isn't it? You'll accept our apologies, Mr. Storefield, I trust. Poor Dick here will never get over it.”

“How was I to know? Why, George, old man, we thought it was the Governor turned squatter, or old Billy Wentworth himself. Your trade pays better than ours, let alone being on the square. Well, shake hands; we'll be off. You won't tell the girls, there's a good fellow, will you?”

“I can't promise,” says old George; “it's too good a joke.” Here he laughed a good one. “It isn't often a man gets stuck up by his friends like this. Tell you what; come and have some lunch, and we'll talk it over.”

His man rode up then with the spare horse. Luckily, he was a good way behind, as fellows will keep when they're following a trap, so that they can't be any good when they're wanted. In this case it was just as well. He hadn't seen anything.

"Hobble the horses out and put on their nose-bags, Williams," says he, "and then get out the lunch. Put the things under that tree."

They took out the horses, and the chap got out a basket with cold beef and bread and half a tongue and a bottle of good whisky and water-bag.

We sat down on the grass, and as we'd been riding since sunrise we did pretty well in the feed line, and had a regular good bit of fun. I never thought old George had so much go in him; but good times had made him twice the man he used to be.

After a bit he sends the groom down to the Cowall to water the horses, and, says he—

"Captain, you'd better come and manage Willaroon down there, with Dick for stockman. There's a fortune in it, and it's a good way off yet. Nobody would think of looking for you there. You're a new chum, just out from home, you know. Plenty of spare country. I'll send you some cattle to start you on a new run after a bit."

"If we could throw our past behind us, I'd do it, and thank God on my knees," said Starlight. "It would make me almost a happy man again. But why think of that or any other honest life in this colony now? We've debarred ourselves from it now and for ever. Our only hope is in another land—America—if we can get away. We shan't be long here now; we're both sick of this accursed work."

"The sooner the better," says George, taking his hand and giving it a hearty grip. "And, look here, you work your way quietly down to Willaroon. That's my place, and I'll give you a line across to the Queensland border. From there you can get over to Townsville, and it's easy to sail from there to the islands or any port out of reach of harm from here."

"We'll tackle it next month if we're alive," says I. So we parted.

Not long after this we got a letter from Jim. He'd heard all about the way to do it from a man he'd met in Melbourne that had worked his way down overland from the North. He said once you were there, or near there, there was little or no chance of being interfered with. Jeanie was always in a fright every day Jim went away lest he might be taken and not let come back. So she was always keeping him up to the mark, making him inquire here and look out there until he got a bit of information which told him what he wanted.

This man that worked in the store with him was a fast sort of card, who had been mate of a brig cruising all about and back to Sydney with sandalwood, beche-de-mer, and what they call island trade.

Well, the captain of the craft, who was part owner, had settled in his mind that he'd trade regular with San Francisco now, and touch at Honolulu going and coming. He was to be back at Gladstone in about three months, and then start for California straight away.

This was the very thing, just made to suit us all to pieces. If we could make out to one of the Queensland northern ports it would be easy enough to ship under different names. Once in America, we'd be in a new world, and there'd be nothing to stop us from leading a new life.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHEN we got the notion into our heads, we set to work to carry it out. We didn't want to leave Aileen and mother behind. So it was settled that I was to go over and see them, and try and persuade them to go down to Melbourne and stop with Jeanie after Jim had started.

Then if we all got safe over to San Francisco, Jeanie and they could come over by the first ship that sailed. There was no down upon them, so they could do anything they liked. The main thing was to get Jim off safe and me and Starlight. After that the rest might come along when they pleased. As for dad, he was to take his own road; to go and stay as he chose. It wasn't much use trying to make him do anything else. But he was more like to stop at the old Hollow than anywhere else. It wouldn't have seemed home to him anywhere else, even where he was born, I believe.

The first thing of all was to go to the old place and see mother and Aileen. They were both back at the old cottage, and were a bit more comfortable now. George Storefield had married a lady—a real lady, as Aileen said—and, though she was a nice, good-tempered young woman as ever was, Aileen, of course, wouldn't stay there any longer. She thought home was the best place after all.

We took a couple of days figuring it out at the Hollow. Starlight had a map, and we plotted it out, and marked all the stages which could be safely made—went over all the back tracks and cross-country lines; some we had travelled before, and others of which we knew pretty well from hearsay.

After we'd got all this cut and dry, I started away one beautiful sunshiny morning to ride over to Rocky Flat. I remember the day as well as yesterday, because I took notice of it at the time, and had better cause to remember it before all was over. Everything looked so lovely as I began to clear the foot hills of Nulla Mountain. The birds seemed to chirp and whistle gayer than they ever did before. The dewdrops on the grass and all the twigs and shoots of the trees looked as if it was covered with diamonds and rubies as the sun began to shine and melt some of them. My horse stepped along limber and free. "Oh, Lord," I says to myself, out loud, "what a happy cove I might be if I could start fresh—knowing what I know—and not having all these things against me!"

When I got on to the tableland above Rocky Flat I took a good look at the whole place. Everything was as quiet and peaceful as if nothing had ever happened within miles of it—as if I hadn't had Goring's handcuffs on me—as if Jim hadn't had the bullets whistling round him, and risked his life on an unbridled horse—as if the four dead men had not lain staring up to the sky in the gully up yonder for days before they were found and buried.

But now it looked as if only two or three people had ever been there from the beginning of the world. The wild ducks swam and splashed in the little waterhole above the house. Two or three of the cows were walking down to the creek, as quiet and peaceable as you please. There was some poultry at the back, and the little garden was done up that nicely as it hadn't been for many a day.

After I'd pretty well settled in my own mind that there was no one anext or anigh the old place, I drew

up by degrees, bit by bit, and sneaked across the creek. I was just making for the barn when I saw two horsemen pop up sudden round the back of the house and ride towards the front gate. I saw with half an eye they were Sir Ferdinand Morringer and a trooper.

Lucky for me they were looking up the gully instead of my way, and, though my heart nearly stood still, I rode as hard as I could lick for the gate of the barn, which was betwixt me and them. They never looked round. They were too much taken up with watching the spot where Hagan and his lot were found. I had just time to chevy straight into the barn and pull off my saddle and bridle and hide under the hay when they shifted full towards where I'd been and then hung up their horses. The trooper tied his to a dead branch of a tree, and then went moving about. I was mortally afraid of his stumbling against something and spoiling the whole affair.

It seems Sir Ferdinand had never given up the notion of our turning up at Rocky Flat some day or other; so he used to take a turn himself that way every now and again on the chance, and a very good chance it nearly turned out to be. Besides this, it seems since he'd heard of her being at the ball at Turon he'd taken a great fancy to Aileen, and used to talk to her as much as she'd let him, when she was at George Storefield's and any other place where he met her. He wouldn't have had much chance of saying the second word, only he was a good-natured, amusing sort, and always as respectful to her as if she'd been a lady. Besides, Aileen had a kind of fancy that it might make things no worse for us if she was civil to him. Anyway, she thought, as women will do, that she might get something out of him perhaps once in a way that would be of use to us. I

don't believe as it would make a scrap of difference one way or the other. And, like people who try to be too clever, she was pretty near being caught in her own trap this time. Not that I blame the poor thing, she did all for the best, and would have given the eyes out of her head, I believe, to have done us real good, and seen us clear of all our troubles.

Well, she brings a chair out on the verandah, and Sir Ferdinand he sat down on a bench there for half-an-hour, talking away and laughing, just as gentlemen will to pretty girls, no matter who they are. And I could see Aileen look up and laugh now and then, pleased like. She couldn't help it. And there was I stuck in the confounded barn among the straw all the time looking out through one of the cracks and wondering if he was ever going to clear out. Sometimes I thought the trooper, who was getting tired of dodging about doing nothing, couldn't be off seeing my horse's tracks leading slap into the barn door. But he was thinking of something else, or else wasn't much in the tracking line. Some men would see a whole army of fresh tracks, as plain as print, right under their noses and wouldn't drop down to anything.

However, last of all I saw him unhitch his horse and take the bridle on his arm, and then Aileen put on her hat and walked up to the top of the ridge along the stony track with him. Then I saw him mount and start off at a rattling good bat along the road to Turon and the trooper after him. I felt all right again then, and watched Aileen come slowly down the road again with her head down, quite thoughtful like, very different from the way she went up. She didn't stop at the house, but walked straight down to the barn and came in at the door. I

wondered what she would do when she saw my horse. But she didn't start, only said—

“You may come out now, Dick; I knew you were here. I saw you ride in just as Sir Ferdinand and the trooper came up.”

“So that's why you were making yourself so pleasant,” says I, laughingly. “I mustn't tell Starlight, I suppose, or we shall be having a new yarn in the newspapers—‘Duel between Sir Ferdinand Morringer and Captain Starlight.’”

She laughed too, and then looked sad and serious like again.

“I wonder if we shall ever have an end to this wretched hide-and-seek work. God knows I would do anything that an honest girl could do for you boys and him, but it something looks dark enough, and I have dreadful fears that all will be in vain, and that we are fated to death and ruin at the end.”

“Come, come, don't break down before the time,” I said. “It's been a close shave, though; but Sir Ferdinand won't be back for a bit, so we may as well take it easy. I've got a lot to say to you.”

“He said he wouldn't be back this way till Friday week,” says she. “He has an escort to see to then, and he expected to be at Stony Creek in a couple of hours from this. He'll have to ride for it.”

We walked over to the house. Neither of us said anything for a bit. Mother was sitting in her old chair by the fire knitting. Many a good pair of woollen socks she'd sent us, and many's the time we'd had call to bless her and her knitting—as we sat our horses, night after night, in a perishing frost, or when the rain set in that run of wet winters we had, when we'd hardly a dry stitch

on us by the week together, when we had enough of them and the neck wrappers, I expect plenty of others round about were glad to get 'em. It was partly for good nature, for mother was always a kind-hearted poor soul as ever was, and would give away the shoes off her feet—like most Irish people I've met—to anyone that wanted them worse than herself, and partly for the ease it gave her mind to be always doing something steady like. Mother hadn't book-learning, and didn't always understand the things Aileen read to her. She was getting too old to do much in the house now. But her eyes were wonderful good still, and this knitting was about the greatest pleasure she had left in the world. If anything had happened to stop her from going on with that, I don't believe she would have lived a month.

Her poor old face brightened up when she seen me, and for a few minutes you'd have said no thought of trouble could come anigh her. Then the tears rolled down her cheeks, and I could see her lips moving, though she did not speak the words. I knew what she was doing, and if that could have kept us right we'd never have gone wrong in the world. But it was to be, I suppose.

Mother was a deal older-looking, and couldn't move about as well as she did. Aileen said she'd often sit out in the sun for an hour together and watch her walking up the garden, or putting up the calves, and carrying in the water from the creek, and say nothing. Sometimes she thought her mind was going a bit, and then again she'd seem as sensible as ever she was. To-day, after a bit, she came round and talked more and asked about the neighbours, seemed more curious like, than she'd done, Aileen said, for many a long day.

"You must have something to eat, Dick," says Aileen; "it's a long ride from—from where we know—and what with one thing and another I daresay you've an appetite. Let me see what there is. Mrs. Storefield sent us over a quarter of veal from the farm yesterday, and we've plenty of bacon of our own. Mother and I live half our time on it and the eggs. I'm making quite a fortune by the butter lately. These diggings are wonderful places to send up the price of everything we can grow."

So she got out the fryingpan, and she and I and mother had some veal chops, with a slice or two of bacon to give it a flavour. My word! they were good after a 40-mile ride, and we'd had nothing but corned beef in the Hollow lately. Fresh butter and milk, too; it was a treat. We had cows enough at the Hollow, but we didn't bother ourselves milking; bread and beef and tea, with a glass of grog now and then, was the general run of our grub.

We had a talk about the merry time at the Turon races, and Aileen laughed in spite of herself at the thought of Starlight walking down the ball-room to be introduced to her, and being taken up to all the swell people of the place. "He looked grander than any of them, to my fancy," said she; "and oh! what a cruel shame it seems that he should ever have done what keeps him from going among his equals as he was born to do. Then I should never have seen him, I suppose, and a thousand times better, too. I'd give up every hope of seeing him again in this world, God knows how cheerfully, if it would serve him or help his escape."

"I'm down here now to see you about the same escape," I said; and then I told her about Jim's letter, and what he said about the mate of the ship. She listened

for a good while patiently, with her hand in mine, like we used to sit in old days, when we were young and happy and alive—alive, not dead men and women walking about and making believe to live. So I told her how we made it up to meet somewhere near the Queensland border. Jim to come up the Murray from Melbourne, and so on to the Darling, and we to make across for the Lower Bogan. If we could carry this out all right—and it looked pretty likely—the rest of the game would be easy; and once on blue water—oh! my God, what new creatures we should all be.

Aileen threw her arms round my neck and sobbed and cried like a child; she couldn't speak for a bit, and when she looked up her eyes seemed to have a different kind of look in them—a far-away, dreamy sort of light from what I'd ever noticed in them.

"It may come about," she said, "Dick. I've prayed whole nights through and vowed my life to the Blessed Virgin. She may accept the service of my years that are to come. It may be permitted after all the sins of our people."

After this she dried her eyes and went to her room for a bit, while I had a quiet, easy sort of talk with mother, she saying a word or two now and then, and looking at me most of the time, as if that was enough without talking.

Then Aileen came out of her room with her habit and hat on. "Run up my horse, Dick," she says, "and I'll take you over to see George Storefield's new place. A ride will do me good, and I daresay you're not tired."

I caught her horse and saddled him for her, and off we went down the old track we knew so well all our lives.

I told her all about our lark with old George, and

how good he'd been through it all; besides promising to give us a lift through his country when we made the grand start. She said it was just like him—that he was the kindest soul in the world, and the most thoughtful. The new Mrs. Storefield had been very civil and friendly to her, and told her she knew George's feeling towards her, and respected it. But Aileen never could feel at home in the grand new house now, and only would go to see old Mrs. Storefield, who still lived in the family cottage, and found it the best suited to her. So we yarned away till we got in sight of the place. When I saw the new two-story stone house I was regular struck all of a heap.

Old George had got on in the world and no mistake. He'd worked early and late, always been as steady as a rock, and had looked ahead instead of taking his pleasure straight off when he got the first few hundred pounds together. He'd seen fat cattle must be dear and scarce for years to come. Noticed, too, that however cheap a far-away bit of country was held, sometimes bought for £200 or £300, it always rose in value year by year. So with store cattle. Now and again they'd fall to nothing. Then he'd buy a whole lot of poor milkers' calves about Burrangong, or some of those thick places where they never fattened, for £1 a head or less, and send them away to his runs in the Lachlan. In six months you wouldn't know 'em. They'd come down well-grown fat cattle in a year or two, and be worth their £6 or £8 a head.

The same way with land; he bought up all the little bits of allotments with cottages on them round Paramatta and Windsor way and Campbelltown—all them old-fashioned sleepy old places near Sydney, for cash, and

cheap enough. The people that had them, and had lived a pokey life in them for many a year, wanted the money to go to the diggings with, and quite right too. Still, and all this land was rising in value, and George's children, if he had any, would be among the richest people in the colony.

After he'd married Miss Oldham—they were Hawkesbury people, her grandfather, old Captain Oldham, was one of the officers in the first regiment that came out—he didn't see why he shouldn't have as good a house as anyone else. So he had a gentleman up from Sydney that drew plans, and he had a real stone house built, with rooms upstairs, and furniture to match, a new garden, and a glass house at the side, for all the world like some of them grand places in Darling Point, near Sydney.

Aileen wouldn't go in, and you may be sure I didn't want to, but we rode all round the place, a little way off, and had a real good look at everything. There wasn't a gentleman in the country had better outbuildings of all sorts. It was a real tip-top place, good enough for the Governor himself if he came to live up the country. All the old fencing had been knocked down, and new railings and everything put up. Some of the scraggy trees had been cleared away, and all the dead wood burned. I never thought the old place could have showed out the way it did. But money can do a lot. It ain't everything in this world. But there's precious little it won't get you, and things must be very bad it won't mend. A man must have very little sense if he don't see as he gets older that character and money are the two things he's got to be carefulest of in this world. If he's not particular to a shade about either or both of 'em, he'll find his mistake.

After we'd had a good look round and seen the good well-bred stock in the paddocks, the growing crops all looking first-rate, everything well fed and hearty, showing there was no stint of grub for anything, man or beast, we rode away from the big house entrance and came opposite the slip-rails on the flat that led to the old cottage.

"Wouldn't you like to go in just for a minute, Dick?" says Aileen.

I knew what she was thinking of.

I was half a mind not, but then something seemed to draw me, and I was off my horse and had the slip-rail down before I knew where I was.

We rode up to the porch just outside the verandah where George's father had planted the creeping roses; big clusters of bloom they used to have on 'em when I was a boy. He showed 'em to me, I remember, and said what fine climbers they were. Now they were all over the porch, and the verandah, and the roof of the cottage, all among the shingles. But Mrs. Storefield wouldn't have 'em cut because her old man had planted 'em. She came out to see us.

"Well, Ailie, child," says she, "come along in, don't sit there on your horse. Who's this you've got with you. Oh! it's you, Dick, is it? My eyes ain't as good as they were. Well, come along in too. You're on the wrong road, and worse 'll come of it. But come along in, I'm not going to be the one to hunt you. I remember old times when you were a little toddling chap, as bold as a lion, and no one dreamt you'd grow up to be the wild chap you are. Gracey's inside, I think. She's as big a fool about ye as ever."

I very near broke down at this. I could stand hard

usage, and send back as good as I got; but this good old woman, that had no call to think anything of me, but that I'd spoiled her daughter's chance of marrying well and respectably—when she talked to me this way, I came close up to making a fool of myself.

We walked in. Gracey was sewing away in the little parlour, where there always used to be a nosegay when I was a boy, and it was that clean and neat I was afraid to go into it, and never easy till I got out again. There she sat as sober-looking and steady as if she'd been there for five years, and meant to be for five years more. She wasn't thinking of anybody coming, but when she looked up and saw me her face changed all of a sudden, and she jumped up and dropped her work on the floor.

"Why, whatever brings you here, Dick?" she said. "Don't you know it's terribly dangerous? Sir Ferdinand is always about here now. He stayed at George's new house last night. Wasn't he at Rocky Flat to-day?"

"Yes, but he won't be back for a week. He told Aileen here he wouldn't." Here I looked at them both.

"Aileen's carrying on quite a flirtation with Sir Ferdinand," says Gracey. "I don't know what someone else would say if he saw everything."

"Doesn't he talk to anyone when he comes here, or make himself pleasant?" I said. "Perhaps there's more than one in the game."

"Perhaps there is," says Gracey; "but he thinks, I believe, that he can get something out of us girls about you and your goings on, and where you plant; and we think we're quite as clever as he is, and might learn something useful too. So that's how the matter lies at present. Are you going to be jealous?"

"Not a bit in the world," I said, "even if I had the

right. I'll back you two, as simple as you look, against any Inspector of Police from here to South Australia."

After this we began to talk about other things, and I told Gracey all about our plans and intentions. She listened very quiet and steady to it all, and then she said she thought something might come of it. Anyhow, she would go whenever I sent for her to come, no matter where.

"What I've said to you, Dick, I've said for good and all. It may be in a month or two, or it may be years and years. But whenever the time comes, and we have a chance, a reasonable chance, of living peaceably and happily, you may depend upon my keeping my word if I'm alive."

We three had a little more talk together, and Aileen and I mounted and rode home.

It was getting on dusk when we started. They wanted us to stop, but I daren't do it. It was none too safe as it was, and it didn't do to throw a chance away. Besides, I didn't want to be seen hanging about George's place. There was nobody likely to know about Aileen and me riding up together and stopping half-an-hour; but if it came to spending the evening, there was no saying who might have ears and eyes open. At home I could have my horse ready at a minute's warning, and be off like a shot at the first whisper of danger.

So off we went. We didn't ride very fast back. It was many a day since we had ridden over that ground together side by side. It might be many a day, years, perhaps, before we did the same thing again. Perhaps never! Who was to know? In the risks of a life like mine, I might never come back—never set eyes again upon the sister that would have given her life for mine!

Never watch the stars glitter through the forest-oak branches, or hear the little creek ripple over the slate bar as it did to-night.

CHAPTER XXV.

WE rode along the old track very quiet, talking about old times—or mostly saying nothing, thinking our own thoughts. Something seemed to put it into my head to watch every turn in the track—every tree and bush by the roadside—every sound in the air—every star in the sky. Aileen rode along at last with her head drooped down as if she hadn't the heart to hold it up. How hard it must have seemed to her to think she didn't dare even to ride with her own brother in the light of day without starting at every bush that stirred—at every footstep, horse or man, that fell on her ear!

There wasn't a breath of air that night. Not a leaf stirred—not a bough moved of all the trees in the forest that we rode through. A 'possum might chatter or a night-owl cry out, but there wasn't any other sound, except the ripple of the creek over the stones, that got louder and clearer as we got nearer Rocky Flat. There was nothing like a cloud in the sky even. It wasn't an over-light night, but the stars shone out like so many fireballs, and it was that silent anyone could almost have fancied they heard the people talking in the house we left, though it was miles away.

"I sometimes wonder," Aileen says, at last, raising up her head, "if I had been a man whether I should have done the same things you and Jim have, or whether I should have lived honestly and worked steadily like George over there. I think I should have done so, I really do;

that nothing would have tempted me to take what was not my own—or to—to—do other things. I don't think it is in my nature somehow."

"I don't say as you would, Ailie," I put in, "but there's many things to be thought of when you come to reckon what a boy sees, and how he's brought up in the bush. It's different with girls—though I've known some of them that were no great shakes either, and middling handy among the clearskins, too."

"It's hard to say," she went on, more as if she was talking to herself than to me; "I feel that. Bad example—love of pleasure—strong temptation—evil company—all these are heavy weights to drag down men's souls to hell. Who knows whether I should have been better than the thousands, the millions, that have taken the broad road that leads to destruction. Oh! how dreadful it seems to think that when once a man has sinned in some ways in this world there's no turning back—no hope—no mercy—only long bitter years of prison life—worse than death; or, if anything can be worse, a felon's death; a doom dark and terrible, dishonouring to those that die and to those that live. Oh! that my prayers may avail—not my prayers only, but my life's service—my life's service."

Next morning I was about at daybreak and had my horse fed and saddled up with the bridle on his neck, ready all but slipping the bit into his mouth, in case of a quick start. I went and helped Aileen to milk her cows, nine or ten of them there were, a fairish morning's work for one girl; mothering the calves, bailing up, leg-roping, and all the rest of it. We could milk well, all three of us, and mother, too, when she was younger. Women are used to cattle in Ireland, and England, too.

The men don't milk there, I hear tell. That wouldn't work here. Women are scarce in the regular bush, and though they'll milk for their own good and on their own farms you'll not get a girl to milk, when she's at service, for anybody else.

One of the young cows was a bit strange with me, so I had to shake a stick at her and sing out "Bail up" pretty rough before she'd put her head in. Aileen smiled something like her old self for a minute, and said—

"That comes natural to you now, Dick, doesn't it?"

I stared for a bit, and then burst out laughing. It was a rum go, wasn't it? The same talk for cows and Christians. That's how things get stuck into the talk in a new country. Some old hand like father, as had been assigned to a dairy settler, and spent all his mornings in the cow-yard, had taken to the bush and tried his hand at sticking-up people. When they came near enough of course he'd pop out from behind a tree in a rock, with his old musket or a pair of pistols, and when he wanted 'em to stop "Bail up, d—yer," would come a deal quicker and more natural-like to his tongue than "Stand." So "bail up" it was from that day to this, and there'll have to be a deal of change in the ways of the colonies and them as come from 'em before anything else takes its place, between the man that's got the arms and the man that's got the money.

After we'd turned out the cows we put the milk into the little dairy. How proud Jim and I used to be because we dug out the cellar part, and built the sod wall round the slabs! Father put on the thatch; then it was as cool and clean as ever. Many a good drink of cold milk we had there in the summers that had passed away. Well, well, it's no use thinking of those sort of

things. They're dead and gone, like a lot of other things and people—like I shall be before long if it comes to that.

We had breakfast pretty comfortable and cheerful. Mother looked pleased and glad to see me once more, Aileen had got on her old face again, and was partly come round to her old ways.

After breakfast Aileen and I went into the garden and had a long talk over the plan we had chalked out for getting away to Queensland. I got out a map Starlight had made and showed her the way we were going to head, and why he thought it more likely to work than he had done before. I was to make my way down the Macquarie and across by Duck Creek, George's station, Willaroon; start from there with a mob of cattle to Queensland as drover or anything that would suit my book.

Jim was to get on to one of the Murray River boats at Swan Hill, and stick to her till he got a chance to go up the Darling with an Adelaide boat to Bourke. He could get across from there by Cunnamulla towards Rockhampton, and from there we were safe to find plenty of vessels bound for the islands or San Francisco. We had hardly cared where, as far as that goes, as long as we got clear away from our own country.

As soon as Jeanie got a word from Jim that he'd sailed and was clear of Australia, she'd write up to Aileen, who was to go down to Melbourne, and take mother with her. They could stop with Jeanie until they got a message from San Francisco to say he'd safely arrived there. After that they could start by the first steamer. They'd have money enough to take their passages and something handsome in cash when they got to land.

Aileen agreed to it all, but in a curious sort of way.

"It looked well," she said, "and might be carried out, particularly as we were all going to work cautiously and with such a lot of preparation." Everything that she could do would be done, we might be sure; but though she had prayed and sought aid from the Blessed Virgin and the saints—fasting and on her bare knees, night after night—she had not been able to get one gleam of consolation. Everything looked very dark, and she had a terrible feeling of anxiety and dread about the carrying it out. But she didn't want to shake my courage, I could see; so she listened and smiled and cheered me up a bit at the end, and I rode away, thinking there was a good show for us after all.

I got back to the Hollow right enough, and for once in a way it seemed as if the luck was on our side. Maybe it was going to turn—who was to know? There had been men who had been as deep in it as any of us that had got clean away to other countries and lived safe and comfortable to the day of their death—didn't die so soon either—lived to a good round age, and had wives and children round them that never knew but what they'd been as good as the best. That wouldn't be our case; but still if we once were able to put the sea between us and our old life the odds would be all in our favour instead of being a hundred to one that we weren't placed and no takers.

Starlight was glad enough to see me back, and like everything he tackled, had been squaring it all for our getting away with head and hand. We wanted to take everything with us that could do us any good, naturally. Father and he had made it right with someone they knew at Turon to take the gold and give them a price for it—not all it was worth, but something over three-fourths value. The rest he was to keep for his share,

for trouble and risk. There was some risk, no doubt, in dealing with us, but all the gold that was bought in them days wasn't square, not by a lot. But there was no way of swearing to it. Gold was gold, and once it was in the banks it was lumped up with the rest. There was a lot of things to be thought of before we regularly made a move for good and all; but when you make up your mind for a dart, it's wonderful how things shape. We hadn't much trouble dividing the gold, and what cash there was we could whack easy enough. There was the live stock that was running in the Hollow, of course. We couldn't well take them with us, except a few of the horses. We made a deal at last with father for them. He took my share and Starlight's, and paid us in cash out of his share of the notes. All we wanted was a couple of horses each, one to carry a pack, one to ride.

As for dad, he told us out, plump and plain, that he wasn't going to shift. The Hollow was good enough for him, and there he was going to stop. If Jim and I and Starlight chose to try and make blank emigrants of ourselves, well and good. He didn't see as they'd have such a rosy time getting over to these new townships on the other side. We might get took in, and wish we was back again before all was said and done. But some people could never let well alone. Here we had everything that any man in his senses could wish for, and we wasn't contented. Everyone was going to cut away and leave him; he'd be all by himself, with no one but the dog for company, and be as miserable as a bandicoot; but no one cared a blank brass farden about that.

"Come with us, governor," says Starlight, "have a cruise round the world, and smell salt-water again. You've not been boxed up in the bush all your life,

though you've been a goodish while there. Make a start and bring old Crib too."

"I'm too old and getting stiff in the j'int's," says dad, brightening up a bit, "or I don't say as I wouldn't. Don't mind my growling. But I'm bound to be a bit lonely like when you are all drawed off the camp. No! take your own way and I'll take mine."

"Next Monday ought to see us off," says Starlight. "We have got the gold and cash part all right. I've had that money paid to Knightley's credit in the Australian Bank I promised him, and got a receipt for it."

"That's just like yer," says father, "and a rank soft thing for a man as has seen the world to drop into. Losin' yer share of the five hundred quid, and then dropping a couple of hundred notes at one gamble, besides buying a horse yer could have took for nothing. He'll never bring twenty pound again, neither."

"Always pay my play debts," says Starlight. "Always did, and always will. As for the horse—a bargain, a bargain."

"And a dashed bad bargain, too. Why didn't ye turn parson instead of taking to the bush?" says father, with a grin. "Dashed if I ain't seen some parsons that could give you odds and walk round ye at horse-dealin'."

"You take your own way, Ben, and I'll take mine," says Starlight, rather fierce, and then father left off and went to do something or other, while us two took our horses and rode out. We hadn't a long time to be in the old Hollow now. It had been a good friend to us in time of need, and we was sorry in a kind of way to leave it. We were going to play for a big stake, and if we lost we shouldn't have another throw in.

Our horses were in great buckle now; they hadn't

been doing much lately. I had the one I'd brought with me, and a thoroughbred brown horse that had been broken in the first season we came there.

Starlight was to ride Rainbow, of course, and he had great picking before he made up his mind what to choose for second horse. At last he pitched upon a thoroughbred bay mare named Locket that had been stolen from a mining township the other side of the country. She was the fastest mare they'd ever bred—sound, and a weight-carrier, too.

"I think I'll take Locket after all," says he, after thinking about it best part of an hour. "She's very fast and a stayer. Good-tempered, too, and the old horse has taken up with her. It will be company for him."

"Take your own way," I said, "but I wouldn't chance her. She's known to a lot of jockey-boys and hangers-on. They could swear to that white patch on her neck among a thousand."

"If you come to that, Rainbow is not an every-day horse, and I can't leave him behind, can I? I'll ship him, if I can, that's more. But it won't matter much, for we'll have to take back tracks all the way. You didn't suppose we were to ride along the mail road, did you?"

"I didn't suppose anything," says I, "but that we were going to clear out the safest way we could. If we're to do the swell business we'd better do it apart, or else put an advertisement into the *Turon Star* that Starlight, Marston, and Co. are giving up business and going to leave the district, all accounts owing to be sent in by a certain date."

"A first-rate idea," says he. "I'm dashed if I don't do it. There's nothing like making one's exit in good

form. How savage Morringer will be! Thank you for the hint, Dick."

There was no use talking to him when he got into this sort of humour. He was the most mad, reckless character I ever came across, and any kind of checking only seemed to make him worse. So I left him alone, for fear he should want to do something more venturesome still, and went on with my packing and getting ready for the road.

We fixed up to start on the Monday, and get as far away the first couple of days as we could manage. We expected to get a good start by making a great push the first day or two, and, as the police would be thrown off the scent in a way we settled—and a good dodge it was—we should have all the more time to be clear of New South Wales before they regularly dropped that we were giving them leg bail for it.

The Sunday before Starlight started away by himself, taking a couple of good horses with him—one he led, and a spare saddle, too. He took nothing but his revolver, and didn't say where he was going, but I pretty well guessed to say good-bye to Aileen. Just as he started he looked back and says—

"I'm going for a longish ride to-day, Dick, but I shall be here late if I'm back at all. If anything happens to me my share of what there is I give to her, if she will take it. If not, do the best you can with it for her benefit."

He didn't take Warrigal with him, which I was sorry for, as the half-caste and I didn't hit it well together, and when we were by ourselves he generally managed to do or say something he knew I didn't like. I kept my hands off him on account of Starlight, but there was

many a time my fingers itched to be at him, and I could hardly keep from knocking some of the sulkiness out of him. This day, somehow, I was not in the best of tempers myself. I had a good lot on my mind. Starting away seems always a troublesome, bothering sort of thing, and if a man's at all inclined to be cranky it'll come out then.

Next day we were going to start on a long voyage, in a manner of speaking, and whether we should have a fair wind or the vessel of our fortune would be wrecked and we go down with it no one could say. This is how it happened. One of the horses was bad to catch and took a little trouble in the yard. Most times Warrigal was quiet enough with 'em, but when he got regular into a rage he'd skin a horse alive, I really believe. Anyhow, he began to hammer the colt with a roping-pole, and as the yard was that high that no beast could jump it he had him at his mercy. I wouldn't have minded a lick or two, but he went on and on, nearly knocking the poor brute down every time, till I could stand it no longer, and told him to drop it.

He gave me some saucy answer, until at last I told him I'd make him. He dared me, and I rushed at him. I believe he'd have killed me that minute if he'd had the chance, and he made a deuced good offer at it.

He stuck to his roping-stick—a good, heavy-ended gum sapling, six or seven feet long—and as I came at him he struck at my head with such vengeance that, if it had caught me fair, I should never have kicked. I made a spring to one side, and it hit me a crack on the shoulder that wasn't a good thing in itself. I was in at him before he could raise his hands, and let him have it right and left.

Down he went and the stick atop of him. He was up again like a wild cat, and at me hammer and tongs—but he hadn't the weight, though he was quick and smart with his hands. I drew off and knocked him clean off his pins. Then he saw it wasn't good enough, and gave it best.

"Never mind, Dick Marston," says he, as he walked off; and he fixed his eyes on me that savage and deadly-looking, with the blood running down his face, that I couldn't help shivering a bit, "you'll pay for this. I owe it you and Jim, one apiece."

"Confound you," I said, "it's all your own fault. Why couldn't you stop ill-using the horse? You don't like being hit yourself. How do you think he likes it?"

"What business that of yours?" he said. "You mind your work and I'll mind mine. This is the worst day's work you've done this year, and so I tell you."

He went away to his gunyah then, and except doing one or two things for Starlight would not lift his hand for anyone that day.

I was sorry for it when I came to think. I daresay I might have got him round with a little patience and humbugging. It's always a mistake to lose your temper and make enemies; there's no knowing what harm they may do ye. People like us oughtn't to throw away a chance, even with a chap like Warrigal. Besides, I knew it would vex Starlight, and for his sake I would have given a trifle it hadn't happened. However, I didn't see how Warrigal could do me or Jim any harm without hurting him, and I knew he'd have cut off his hand rather than any harm should come to Starlight that he could help.

So I got ready. Dad and I had our tea together

pretty comfortable, and had a longish talk. The old man was rather down in the mouth for him. He said he somehow didn't expect the fakement to turn out well. "You're going away," he said, "from where you're safe, and there's a many things goes against a man in our line, once he's away from his own beat. You never know how you may be given away. The Captain's all right here, when he's me to look after him, though he does swear at me sometimes; but he was took last time. He was out on his own hook, and it's my belief he'll be took this time if he isn't very careful. He's a good man to fight through things when once he's in the thick of 'em, but he ain't careful enough to keep dark and close when the play isn't good. You draw along steady by yourself till you meet Jim—that's my advice to ye."

"I mean to do that. I shall work my way down to old George's place, and get on with stock or something till we all meet at Cunnamulla. After that there ain't much chance of these police here grabbing us."

"Unless you're followed up," says the old man. "I've known chaps to go a deuce of a way, once they got on the track, and there's getting some smart fellows among 'em now—native-born chaps as'll be as good at picking up the tracks as you and Jim."

"Well, we must take our chance. I'm sorry for one thing, that I had that barney with Warrigal. It was all his fault. But I had to give him a hardish crack or two. He'd turn dog on me and Jim, and in a minute, if he saw his way without hurting Starlight."

"He can't do it," says dad; "it's sink or swim with the lot of you. And he dursn't either, not he," says father, beginning to growl out his words. "If I ever heard he'd given away anyone in the lot I'd have his

life, if I had to poleaxe him in George Street. He knows me, too."

We sat yarning away pretty late. The old man didn't say it, but I made out that he was sorry enough for that part of his life which had turned out so bad for us boys, and for mother and Aileen. Bad enough he was in a kind of way, old dad, but he wasn't all bad, and I believe if he could have begun again and thought of what misery he was going to bring on the lot of us he would never have gone on the cross. It was too late, too late now, though, to think of that.

Towards morning I heard the old dog growl, and then the tramp of a horse's feet. Starlight rode up to the fire and let his horse go, then walked straight into his corner and threw himself down without speaking. He had had a precious long ride, and a fast one by the look of his horse. The other one he had let go as soon as he came into the Hollow; but none of the three would be a bit the worse after a few hours' rest. The horses, of course, were spare ones, and not wanted again for a bit.

Next morning it was "sharp's the word," and no mistake. I felt a deal smarter on it than yesterday. When you've fairly started for the road half the journey's done. It's the thinking of this and forgetting that, and wondering whether you haven't left behind the t'other thing, that's the miserablest part of going a journey; when you're once away, no matter what's left behind, you can get on some way or other.

We didn't start so over and above early, though Starlight was up as fresh as paint at sunrise, you'd thought he hadn't ridden a yard the day before. Even at the very last there's a lot of things to do and to get. But we all looked slippy and didn't talk much, so that

we got through what we had to do, and had all the horses saddled and packed by about eight o'clock. Even Warrigal had partly got over his temper. Of course I told Starlight about it. He gave him a good rowing, and told him he deserved another hammering, which he had a good mind to give him, if we hadn't been starting for a journey. Warrigal didn't say a word to him. He never did. Starlight told me on the quiet, though, he was sorry it happened, "though it's the rascal's own fault, and served him right. But he's a revengeful beggar," he says, "and that he would play you some dog's trick if he wasn't afraid of me, you may depend your life on."

"Now," says he, "we must make our little arrangements. I shall be somewhere about Cunnamulla by the end of this month (it was only the first week). Jim knows that we are to meet there, and if we manage that all right I think the greatest part of the danger will be over. I shall get right across by Dandaloo to the back blocks of the West Bogan country, between it and the Lachlan. There are tracks through the endless mallee scrub, only known to the tribes in the neighbourhood, and a few half-castes like Warrigal, that have been stock-riding about them. Sir Ferdinand and his troopers might just as well hunt for a stray Arab in the deserts of the Euphrates. If I'm alive—mind you, alive—I'll be at Cunnamulla on the day I mean. And now, good-bye, old fellow. Whatever my sins have been, I've been true to you and your people in the past, and if Aileen and I meet across the seas, as I hope, the new life may partly atone for the old one."

CHAPTER XXVI.

HE shook hands with me and dad, threw his leg over Rainbow, took Locket's bridle as if he was going for an easy day's ride, and cantered off.

Warrigal nodded to both of us, then brought his pack-horse up level, and followed up.

"There goes the Captain," says father. "It's hard to say if we'll ever see him again. I shan't, anyhow, nor you either, maybe. Somehow I've had a notion coming over me this good while as my time ain't going to be long. It don't make no odds, neither. Life ain't no great chop to a man like me, not when he gets the wrong side o' sixty, anyhow. Mine ain't been such a bad innings, and I don't owe much to any man. I mean as I've mostly been square with them that's done me a bad turn. No man can say Ben Marston was ever back'ard in that way; and never will be, that's more. No! them as trod on me felt my teeth some day or other. Eh, old man?" Crib growled. He understood things regular like a Christian, that old dog did. "And now you're agoin' off and Jim's gone—seems only t'other day as you and he was little toddlin' chaps, runnin' to meet me when I come home from work, clearin' that fust paddock, and telling me mammy had the tea ready. Perhaps I'd better ha' stuck to the grubbin' and clearin' after all. It looked slow work, but it paid better than this here in the long run." Father turns away from me then, and walks back a step or two. Then he faces me. "Dash it, boy, what are ye waitin' for? Shake hands, and tell Jim the old man han't forgot him yet."

It was many a day since I'd felt father's hand in

kindness; he didn't do them sort of things. I held out mine and his fingers closed on it one minute, like a vice—blest if I didn't expect to feel the bones grate agin one another; he was that strong he hardly knew his own strength, I believe. Then he sits down on the log by the fire. He took out his pipe, but somehow it wouldn't light. "Good-bye, Crib," says I. The old dog looked at me for a bit, wagged his tail, and then went and sat between dad's knees. I took my horse and rode away slowish. I felt all dead and alive like when I got near the turn in the track. I looked back and seen the dog and him just the same. I started both horses then. I never set eyes on him again. Poor old dad!

I wasn't very gay for a bit, but I had a good horse under me, another alongside, a smartish lot of cash in notes and gold, some bank deposits too, and all the world before me. My dart now was to make my way to Willaroon and look sharp about it. My chance of getting through was none too good, but I settled to ride a deal at night and camp by day. I began to pick up my spirits after I got on the road that led up the mountain, and to look ahead to the time when I might call myself my own man again.

Up the mountain side track I went steady enough, wouldn't do to lame a horse at starting. When I got to the top I couldn't help turning round and looking at the old place for the last time—the last time.

The sun was well up now, and everything looked that bright and jolly you couldn't hardly believe as there could be anything wrong in the world. The grass was rushing up after the spring showers, and making even the bare mountain range look first-rate.

The night fog was lying over the Hollow, but here

and there you could see a big sheet of green when it had lifted, and a clear bit of river with the sun shining on it. Old Nulla Mountain was full of shadows, pale green, and dark, then lightish colours, with purple over all. The birds whistled and called. The same long strings of water-fowl was flying far over head, heading down to the marshes, low down the Macquarie, that Jim and I used to wonder at when we were boys. Everything was full of life and enjoying itself but us. Why should we be out of it? Could we have helped it—beginning, as we did, when we were quite little chaps, and hardly knew right from wrong? or was it all fixed for us from the beginning, before we was born, as some people believe, and there was no get away for us, try as hard as we could? Sometimes I think one thing, and sometimes the other. It's mighty hard to say.

Well, after riding in and out, and round and round a bit, I started a straight course north-east, where I knew I could make the Macquarie River in twenty-five miles. Dreadful thick, broken country, but I didn't mind that. All the better for not being followed. When I pulled up after two hours' sharpish riding I'd struck the leading range that falls and falls down to the rivers.

It was awful steep in places, but I had no time to lead the horses, we had to do it; and as I went along at a hard jog, the stones rolled down from between the horses' feet, and rattled as if they were going miles away. It was a long hour's ride before I got on to the river bank at last, and pulled up for a spell.

The river there runs through deep rocky valleys and over slate bars; just like the Turon. Plenty of gold was found there afterwards, but none of the diggers had managed to make out that way. There was any amount

at the Turon, and as long as that held out they were sure not to go further just yet. I picked upon a small green flat where I hobbled the horses for half an hour, and had a smoke myself. Then I mounted and pushed on.

I made a big push of it that night, and didn't pull up till the Southern Cross was pretty low down in the sky and wrong end up besides. That told me it wasn't so far off daylight. Many a night when I'd been camped with cattle I'd watched it go lower and lower and change in its shape like, till the stars that were on the top of it the first half of the night were lowest down. It's the bushman's clock, that cross of stars is. Many a long cold night I'd been glad enough to have it to go by.

This time I'd been riding on, hour after hour, till the horses began to get a bit slack. Not beat, or anything like that; it wasn't one twenty-four hours or near it that would bake two such horses in regular good buckle; but any hack, after you've been on him sixteen hours or so, begins to go a bit stiff, and is none the worse for a spell. However, I'd reached the place I was making for, and if I wasn't tired I was all as well pleased to stop.

Where I'd made for was a curious bit of water, twenty miles back from the river, called the Bird's Nest. A big, deep lagoon, like a small lake, full of ducks and all that sort, and a noted watering place for wild cattle in the dry summers. The water was deep enough now, but the old hands used to say that there'd been drier seasons than had ever been known yet, seeing the Bird's Nest was full of trees, and not very small ones either. They were all dead, and no white man had ever seen them alive. These kind of gums won't grow in water. So they made out that there had been a lot of bad seasons running, when the bed of the lake was dry and these

trees had time to come up from the seed and grow up to the size they were. Then the first real wet year there was when the overflow of the river filled up the Bird's Nest, of course they all died; but as some of 'em were over two foot through, and must have taken twenty years to grow to that size in, it would be a blue look-out for the country if ever such a dry time came round again.

I didn't trouble myself about these notions much, the squatters were well able to take care of themselves. It was no business of mine. All I cared about was, that it was a first-rate shop for feed and water, and that there was an old hut there where the men used to stop when they were mustering out back. When I rode up to it no one had been there lately. The stars were shining on the water between the gloomy-looking forest of dead trees with their branches sticking out against the sky, and a wind coming up before dawn whistling through them. Lonely and deserted enough it looked, my word, as if no one had ever been there since the beginning of the world.

I jumped down and took the saddles off and led the horses down to the water. There they took a good drink. I hadn't been riding fast last hour. Then I short-hobbled them on the wild trefoil that grew up to their knees on the shore. It had rained in those parts lately, and the feed was knee-high everywhere. I made a fire after that, boiled myself a pot of tea, had a bit of bread and meat, and turned in. I had blankets with me, and there was a bunk or two in the hut, with a hide nailed across, that weren't so bad for a man that had ridden ninety miles.

When I woke up the sun was middling high. I didn't care about turning out early, as it was a hundred to one about any police coming that way—in fact, there were

deuced few people that knew their way to the Bird's Nest and back again to the frontage. So I settled to let the horses spell there that day and start towards sundown. They weren't far off; I could see them from the door. One was lying down, and the other one standing close by him; both as full as ticks and good for another long day, bar accidents.

I boiled my quart-pot and had my breakfast as comfortable as you please. I hadn't done so bad the first day. I was clear away from our own side of the country, and if I could get over to Willaroon I might hang about for a bit, and get smuggled over to Cunnamulla with a mob of store cattle or some horses going to Queensland. Men that could ride and knew their work were scarce then, and people didn't bother finding out where they'd come from last.

Terrible still and quiet it all was as I sat there munching my damper and cutting off slice after slice of the boiled corned beef I'd brought with me. Now and then a flock of black duck or teal would fly out of the lagoon and wheel round and round. After a bit they'd drop again. The gray and crimson galah parrots would come and settle on the outside trees or on the flat, or a dozen crested pigeons rise whirring out of the long grass like quail.

I had nothing to do but smoke and take it easy all the time. Then up comes a mob of brumbies (wild horses), charging out of the scrub full hot, as if they'd not had water for a week. I knew better than that, but they get into a way of doing all their travelling fast. I've known 'em come thirty miles in a night for water and be back again by daylight. The leading stallion came neighing and prancing up to my two. I had to run for my

life and put their bridles on, else he'd most likely have run 'em off, hobbles and all. Wild horses often do that, and pretty foolish I'd have looked, shouldn't I? I had to fire a shot at him at last before he'd leave off botherin' 'em, and then away he goes and his mob after him, heads and tails up, full split. You could hear 'em crashing through the scrub like a wind-storm.

The day was pretty long after all. I couldn't do anything but moon about and smoke and watch the horses. I wasn't sorry when the sun began to get low, and it was time to pack and saddle up. The horses were as right as nine-pence after their spell and the good feed they'd had. I began to think I should slip the police this time for good and all.

Next day after that I was at Willaroon. I could have got there overnight, but it looked better to camp near the place and come next morning. There I was all right. The overseer was a reasonable sort of man, and I found old George had been as good as his word, and left word if a couple of men like me and Starlight came up we were to be put on with the next mob of cattle that were going to Queensland. He did a store cattle trade with the far-out squatters that were stocking up new country in Queensland, and it paid him very well, as nearly everything did that he touched. We were to find our own horses and be paid so much a week—three pounds, I think—and so on.

As luck would have it there was a biggish mob to start in a week, and road-hands being scarce in that part the overseer was disappointed that my mate, as he called him, hadn't come on, but I said he'd gone another track.

"Well, he'll hardly get such wages at any other job,"

says he, "and if I was Mr. Storefield I wouldn't hire him again, not if he wanted a billet ever so bad."

"I don't suppose he will," says I, "and serves him quite right, too."

I put my horses in the paddock—there was wild oats and crowfoot knee-high in it—and helped the overseer to muster and draft. He gave me a fresh horse, of course. When he saw how handy I was in the yard he got quite shook on me, and, says he—

"By George, you're just the chap the boss wants to send out to some new country he's going to take up in Queensland. What's your name? Now I think of it he didn't tell me."

"William Turner," says I.

"Very well, William," says he, "you're a dashed good man, I can see, and I wish I could pick up a few more like you. Blessed if I ever saw such a lot of duffers in my life as there are on this side. I've hardly seen a man come by that's worth his grub. You couldn't stop till the next mob starts, I suppose? I'd make it worth your while."

"I couldn't well this time," says I; "my mate's got a friend out north just from home, and we're tied to time to meet him. But if I come back this way I'll put in a year with you."

"Well, an offer's an offer," says he. "I can't say more, but I think you'll do better by stopping on here."

I got away with the cattle all right, and the drover in charge was told to do all he could for me. The overseer said I was as good as two men, and it was "Bill" here and "William" there all the time till we were off. I wasn't sorry to be clear away, for of course any day a trooper might have ridden up and asked questions about

the horses, that were a little too good for a working drover.

Besides, I'd had a look at the papers, and I saw that Starlight had been as good as his word, in the matter of the advertisement. Sure enough the *Turon Star* and a lot of other papers had, on the same day, received the same advertisement, with a pound note enclosed, and instructions to insert it four times.

“NOTICE.

“To all whom it may concern.

“The Messrs. Marston Brothers and Co., being about to leave the district, request that all accounts against them may be sent to the Police Camp, Turon, addressed to the care of Sir Ferdinand Morringer, whose receipt will be a sufficient discharge.

“For the firm,

“STARLIGHT.”

I couldn't have believed at first that he'd be so mad. But after a bit I saw that like a lot of his reckless doings it wasn't so far out after all.

All the papers had taken it up as usual, and though some of them were pretty wild at the insult offered to the Government and so on, I could see they'd most of them come to think it was a blind of some sort, meant to cover a regular big touch that we were going in for, close by home, and wanting to throw the police off the scent once more. If we'd really wanted to make tracks, they said, this would be the last thing we'd think of doing. Bit by bit it was put about as there should be a carefully laid plot to stick up all the banks in Turon

on the same day, and make a sweep of all the gold and cash.

I laughed when I saw this, because I knew that it was agreed upon between Aileen and Gracey that, about the time we were fairly started, whichever of them saw Sir Ferdinand first should allow it to be fished out of her, as a great secret, that we were working up to some tremendous big affair of this sort, and which was to put the crown on all our other doings. To make dead sure, we had sent word to Billy the Boy (and some money too) to rise a sham kind of sticking-up racket on the other side of the Turon, towards Bathurst way. He was to frighten a few small people that would be safe to talk about it, and make out that all the bushrangers in the country were camped about there. This was the sort of work that the young villain regularly went in for and took a pleasure in, and by the way the papers put it in he had managed to frighten a lot of travellers and roadside publicans out of their senses most.

As luck would have it, Wall and Hulbert and Moran had been working up towards Mudgee lately and stuck up the mail, and as Master Billy thought it a great lark to ride about with them with a black mask on people began to think the gangs had joined again and that some big thing, they didn't know what, was really on the cards. So a lot of police were telegraphed for, and the Bathurst superintendent came down, all in a hurry, to the Turon, and in the papers nothing went down but telegrams and yarns about bushrangers. They didn't know what the country was coming to; all the sober going people wishing they'd never got an ounce of gold in Australia, and every little storekeeper along the line that had £100 in his cash-box hiding it every night

and afraid of seeing us ride up every time the dogs barked.

All the time we were heading for Cunnamulla, and leaving New South Wales behind us hand over hand.

The cattle of course couldn't travel very fast; 10 or 12 miles a day was enough for them. I could have drowned myself in the creeks as we went crawling along sometimes, and I that impatient to get forward. Eighty miles it was from Cunnamulla to the Queensland border. Once we were over that we'd have to be arrested on warrant, and there were lots of chaps, like us, that were "wanted," on the far-out north stations. Once we sighted the waters of the Warrego we should feel ourselves more than half free.

Then there was Jim, poor old Jim! He wrote to say he was just starting for Melbourne, and very queer he felt about leaving his wife and boy. Such a fine little chap as he'd grown too. He'd just got his head down, he said, and taken to the pulling (he meant working) like our old near-side poler, and he was as happy as a king, going home to Jeanie at night, and having his £3 every Saturday. Now he was going away ever so far by land and sea, and God knows when he might see either of 'em again. If it wasn't for the fear he had of being pitched upon by the police any day, and the long sentence he was sure to get, he'd stay where he was. He wasn't sure whether he wouldn't do so now.

After that Aileen had a letter, a short one, from Jeanie. Jim had gone. She had persuaded him for the sake of the boy, though both their hearts were nearly broken. She didn't know whether she'd done right. Perhaps she never might see him again. The poor fellow had forfeited his coach fare once, and come back to stay

another day with her. When he did go he looked the picture of misery, and something told her it was their last parting.

Well, we struck the river about ten miles this side of Cunnamulla, where there was a roadside inn, a small, miserable kind of place, just one of those half-shanties, half-public-houses, fit for nothing but to trap bushmen, and where the bad grog kills more men in a year than a middling break-out of fever.

Somewhere about here I expected to hear of the other two. We'd settled to meet a few miles one side or the other of the township. It didn't much matter which. So I began to look about in case I might get word of either of 'em, even if they didn't turn up to the time.

Somewhere about dinner time (12 o'clock) we got the cattle on to the river and let 'em spread over the flat. Then the man in charge rode up to the inn, the Traveller's Rest, a pretty long rest for some of 'em (as a grave here and there with four panels of shickery two-rail fence round it showed), and shouted nobblers round for us.

While we was standing up at the bar, waiting for the cove to serve it out, a flash-looking card he was, and didn't hurry himself, up rides a tall man to the door, hangs up his horse, and walks in. He had on a regular town rig—watch and chain, leather valise, round felt hat, like a chap going to take charge of a store or something. I didn't know him at first, but directly our eyes met I saw it was old Jim. We didn't talk—no fear, and my boss asked him to join us, like any other stranger. Just then in comes the landlady to sharpen up the man at the bar.

"Haven't you served those drinks yet, Bob?" she sings out. "Why, the gentlemen called for them half an

hour ago. I never saw such a slow-going crawler as you are. You'd never have done for the Turon boys."

We all looked at her—not a bad-looking woman she'd been once, though you could see she'd come down in the world and been knocked about a bit. Surely I knew her voice! I'd seen her before—why, of course—

She was quicker than I was.

"Well, Dick!" says she, pouring out all the drinks, taking the note, and rattling down the change on the counter, all in a minute, same as I'd often seen her do before, "this is a rough shop to meet old friends in, isn't it? So you didn't know me, eh? We're both changed a bit. You look pretty fresh on it. A woman loses her looks sooner than a man when she goes to the bad. And Jim, too," she goes on; "only to fancy poor old Jim turning up here too! One would think you'd put it up to meet at the township on some plant of that sort."

It was Kate sure enough! How in the world did ever she get here? I knew she'd left the Turon, and that old Mullockson had dropped a lot of his money in a big mining company he'd helped to float, and that never turned out gold enough to pay for the quicksilver in the first crushing. We'd heard afterwards that he'd died and she'd married again; but I never expected to see her brought down so low as this—not but what we'd known many a woman that started on the diggings with silks and satins and a big house and plate-glass windows brought down to a cotton gown and a bark shanty before half-a-dozen years were over.

Jim and I both looked queer. The men began to laugh. Anyone could see we were both in a fix. Jim spoke first.

"Are you sure you're not making a mistake, missis?" says he, looking at her very quiet-like. "Take care what you say."

He'd better have held his tongue. I don't know whether she really intended to give us away. I don't think she did altogether; but with them kind of women it's a regular toss up whether they'll behave reasonable or not. When they're once started, 'specially if they think they've not been treated on the square, they can't stop themselves.

"Take care what I say!" she breaks out, rising her voice to a scream, and looking as if she'd jump over the bar-counter and tear the eyes out of me. "Why should I take care? It's you, Dick Marston, you double-faced treacherous dog that you are, that's got a thousand pounds on your head, that has cause to care, and you, Jim Marston, that's in the same reward, and both of you know it. Not that I've anything against you, Jim. You're a man, and always was. I'll say that for you."

"And you're a woman," groans out poor Jim. "That's the reason you can't hold your infernal tongue, I suppose."

Kate had let the cat out of the bag now and no mistake. You should have seen the drover and his men look at us when they found they had the famous bush-rangers among them that they'd all heard so much about this years past. Some looked pretty serious and some laughed. The drover spoke first.

"Bushranger here or bushranger there," he says, "I'm going to lose a dashed good man among cattle; and if this chattering fool of a woman had held her tongue the pair of ye might have come on with the cattle till they were delivered. Now I'm a man short, and haven't one as I can trust on a pinch. I don't think any more of

you, missis," he says, "for being so dashed ready to give away your friends, supposing they had been on the cross."

But Kate didn't hear. She had fallen down in a kind of fit, and her husband coming in to see what the row was about picked her up, and stood looking at us with his mouth open.

"Look here, my man," says I, "your wife's taken me and this gentleman," pointing to Jim, "for some people she knew before on the diggings, and seems to have got rather excited over it. If it was worth our while to stay here, we'd make her prove it. You'd better get her to lie down, and advise her when she comes to to hold her tongue, or you might be made to suffer by it."

"She's a terror when she's put out, and that's God's truth," says the chap; and starting to drag her over to one of the bits of back bedrooms. "It's all right, I dare say. She will keep meddling with what don't consarn her. I don't care who yer are or what yer are. If you knowed her afore, I expect ye'll think it best to clear while she's unsensible like."

"Here's a shout all round for these men here," says I, throwing a note on the bar. "Never mind the change. Good-bye, chaps. This gentleman and I have some business together, and there's no bushranging in it, you may take my word."

We all left then. The men went back to their cattle. Jim rode quietly along the road to Cunnamulla just like any other traveller. I went down and saddled up my horse. I'd got everything I wanted in my swag, so I'd left the other horse at Willaroon.

"Never mind the settlement," says I to the drover. "I'll be coming back to the station after I've finished my

business in Queensland, and we can make up the account then."

The overseer looked rather doubtful.

"This seems rather mixed," says he. "Blest if I understand it. That woman at the pub. seems half off her head to me. I can't think two quiet-looking chaps like you can be the Marstons. You've been a thundering good road hand anyhow, and I wish you luck."

He shook hands with me. I rode off and kept going along the road till I overtook Jim.

When I'd gone a mile or two there was Jim riding steadily along the road, looking very dull and down-like, just the way he used to do when he was studying how to get round a job of work as he wasn't used to. He brightens up a bit when he sees me, and we both jumped off, and had a good shake-hands and a yarn. I told him about mother and Aileen, and how I'd left dad all by himself. He said Jeanie and the boy were all right, but of course he'd never heard of 'em since, and couldn't help feeling dubersome about meeting her again, particular now this blessed woman had dropped across us, and wouldn't keep her mouth shut.

"As sure as we've had anything to do with her bad luck's followed up," says Jim; "I'd rather have faced a trooper than seen her face again."

"She can't do much now," says I. "We're across the border. I wonder where Starlight is—whether he's in the township or not? As soon as we meet him we can make straight for the ship."

"He's there now," says Jim. "He was at Kate's last night."

"How do you know that?"

"I heard her mutter something about it just when

she went into that fit, or whatever it was. Devilment, I think. I never saw such a woman; and to think she's my Jeanie's sister!"

"Never mind that, Jim. These things can't be helped. But what did she say?"

"Something like this: 'He thought I didn't know him, passing himself off as a gentleman. Warrigal, too. Kate Morrison's eyes are too sharp for that, as he'll find out.'"

"Think she'll give us away again, Jim?"

"God only knows. She mightn't this time, unless she wants to smother you altogether, and don't mind who she hurts along with you."

"There's one good thing in it," says I; "there's no police nearer than Trielgerat, and it's a long day's ride to them. We made it all right before we left the Turon. All the police in the country is looking for us on the wrong road, and will be for a week or two yet."

Then I told him about Aileen putting Sir Ferdinand on the wrong lay, and he said what a clever girl she was, and had as much pluck and sense as two or three men. "A deal more than we've ever showed, Dick," says he, "and that's not saying much either."

He laughed in his quiet way when he heard about Starlight's advertisement in the *Turon Star*, and said it was just like him.

"He's a wonderful clever fellow, the Captain. I've often thought when I've been by myself in Melbourne, sitting quiet, smoking at night, and turning all these things over, that it's a wonder he don't shoot himself when he thinks of what he is and the man he ought to be."

"He's head enough to take us safe out of this dashed old Sydney side," says I, "and land us in another coun-

try, where we'll be free and happy in spite of all that's come and gone. If he does that, we've no call to throw anything up to him."

"Let him do that," says Jim, "and I'll be his servant to the day of my death. But I'm afeard it isn't to be any more than going to heaven right off. It's too good, somehow, to come true; and yet what a thing it is to be leading a working honest life and be afraid of no man! I was very near like that in Melbourne, Dick," he says; "you've no notion what a grand thing it was—when I'd done my week's work, and used to walk about with Jeanie and her boy on Sundays, and pass the time of day with decent square coves that I knew, and never dreamed I was different; then the going home peaceful and contented to our own little cottage; I tell you, Dick, it was heaven on earth. No wonder it regular broke my heart to leave it."

"We're close up to the township now," says I. "This wire fence and the painted gate ain't more than a couple of miles off, that chap said at the inn. I wish there was a firestick in it, and I'd never gone inside a door of it. However, that says nothing. We've got to meet Starlight somehow, and there's no use in riding in together. You go in first, and I'll take a wheel outside the house and meet you in the road a mile or two ahead. Where's your pistol? I must have a look at mine. I had to roll it up in my swag, and it wants loading."

"Mine's a good tool," says Jim, bringing out a splendid-looking revolver—one of these new Dean and Adams's. "I can make prime shooting at fifty yards; but I hope to God I shan't want to use it."

"There's no fear yet a bit," says I; "but it's as well to be ready. I'll load before we go any further."

I loaded and put her back in the belt. We were just going to push on when we heard the sound of galloping, and round a patch of scrub comes a horseman at full speed. When he sees us he cuts off the road and comes towards us.

There was only one horse that carried himself like that, even when he was pulling double. We spotted him the same second. Rainbow and Starlight on him! What in thunder makes him ride like that?

When he came closer we saw by his face that something was up. His eyes had the gloomy, dull fire in them that put me in mind of the first time I saw him when he came back wounded and half dead to the Hollow.

"Don't stop to talk, boys," he sings out, without stopping, "but ride like the devil. Head to the left. That infernal Warrigal has laid the police on your track, Dick. They were seen at Willaroon; may be up at any minute."

"Where's Warrigal now?" I said, as we all took our horses by the head and made for a patch of dark timber we could see far out on the plain.

"He dropped when I fired at him," says Starlight; "but whether the poor beggar's dead or not I can't say. It isn't my fault if he betrays anyone again."

"How did it come out?"

"I was tired of waiting at that confounded hotel—not a soul to speak to. I rode back as far as Kate's, just to see if you had passed. She didn't know me a bit."

"The deuce she didn't! Why she broke out on me and Jim. Said something about you and Warrigal, too."

"Wonderful creatures, women," says he, thoughtful—

like; "and yet I used to think I understood them. No time to do anything, though."

"No; the nearest police station's a day off. I'd give a trifle to know who's after us. How did you find out Warrigal's doubling on me? not that it matters now; d—n him!"

"When I talked about going back he was in a terrible fright, and raised so many objections that I saw he had some reason for it; so I made him confess."

"How did he do it?"

"After we'd passed Dandaloo, and well inside the West Bogan scrubs, he picked up a blackfellow that had once been a tracker; gave him a pound to let them know at the police camp that you were making out by Willaroon."

"I knew he had it in for me," said I; "but I depended on his not doing anything for fear of hurting you."

"So I thought, too; but he expected you'd be trapped at Willaroon before there would be time for you to catch me up. If he hadn't met that Jemmy Wardell, I daresay he wouldn't have thought of it. When he told me I was in such an infernal rage that I fired point blank at him; didn't wait to see whether he was dead or alive, and rode straight back here to warn you. I was just in time—eh, Jim, old man? Why you look so respectable they'd never have known you. Why didn't you stay where you were, James?"

"I wish to God I had!" says poor old Jim. "It's too late to think of that now."

We hadn't over much time for talking, and had to range up close to do it at all at the pace we were going. We did our best, and must have ridden many a mile be-

fore dark. Then we kept going through the night. Starlight was pilot, and by the compass he carried we were keeping something in a line with the road. But we missed Warrigal in the night work, and more than once I suspected we were going round and not keeping a straight course.

We didn't do badly after all, for we struck the main road at daylight and made out that we were thirty miles the other side of Cunnamulla, and in the right direction. The worst of it was, like all short cuts and night riding, we'd taken about twice as much out of our horses as we need have done if we'd been certain of our line.

"This ought to be Murrynebone Creek," says Starlight, "by the look of it," when we came to a goodish broad bit of water. "The crossing place is boggy, so they told me at the hotel. We may as well pull up for a spell. We're in Queensland now, that's one comfort."

It took us all we knew to get over; it was a regular quicksand. Rainbow never got flustered if he was up to his neck in a bog, but my horse got frightened and plunged, so that I had to jump off. Jim's horse was a trifle better, but he hadn't much to spare. We weren't sorry to take the bridles out of their mouths and let them pick a bit on the flat when we got safe over.

We didn't unsaddle our horses—no fear; we never did that only at night; not always then. We took the bits out of their mouths, and let them pick feed round about, with the bridle under their feet, stockhorse fashion. They were all used to it, and you'd see 'em put their foot on a rein, and take it off again, regular as if they knew all about it. We could run full pelt and catch 'em all three in a minute's notice; old Rainbow would hold up his head when he saw Starlight coming, and wait for

him to mount if there was a hundred horses galloping past. Lucky for him, he'd done it scores of times; once on his back there was no fear of any other horse overhauling him, any more than a coolie dog or a flying doe kangaroo.

Pretty well settled it came to be amongst us that we should be well into Queensland before the police were handy. Starlight and Jim were having a pitch about the best way to get aboard one of these pearling craft, and how jolly it would be. The captains didn't care two straws what sort of passengers they took aboard so long as they had the cash and were willing to give a hand when they were wanted.

We were just walking towards the horses to make a fresh start, when Starlight puts up his hand. We all listened. There was no mistaking the sound we heard—horses at speed, and mounted men at that. We were in a sort of angle. We couldn't make back over the infernal boggy creek we'd just passed, and they seemed to be coming on two sides at once.

"By ——! they're on us," says Starlight; and he cocks his rifle, and walks over quite cool to the old horse. "Our chance, boys, is to exchange shots, and ride for it. Keep cool, don't waste your fire, and if we can drop a couple of them we may slip them yet."

We hadn't barely time to get to our horses, when out of the timber they came—in two lots—three on each side. Police, sure enough; and meeting us. That shook us a bit. How the devil did they get ahead of us after the pace we'd ridden the last twenty-four hours, too? When they came close we could see how it was, Sir Ferdinand and three troopers on one side; Inspector Goring, with two more, on the left; while outside, not far from the

lead, rode Sir Watkin, the Braidwood black tracker—the best hand at that work in the three colonies, if you could keep him sober.

Now we could see why they took us in front. He had kept out wide when he saw the tracks were getting hot, so as to come in on the road ahead of us, and meet us full in the teeth.

He had hit it off well this time, blast him! We couldn't make back on account of the creek, and we had double our number to fight, and good men, too, before we could break through, if we could do that.

Our time was come if we hadn't the devil's own luck; but we had come out of as tight a place before, and might do it again.

When they were within fifty yards Sir Ferdinand calls out, "Surrender! It's no use, men," says he; "I don't want to shoot you down, but you must see you're outnumbered. There's no disgrace in yielding now."

"Come on!" says Starlight; "don't waste your breath! There's no man here will be taken alive."

With that, Goring lets drive and sends a bullet that close by my head I put my hand up to feel the place. All the rest bangs away, black tracker and all. I didn't see Sir Ferdinand's pistol smoke. He and Starlight seemed to wait. Then Jim and I fires steady. One trooper drops badly hit, and my man's horse fell like a log and penned his rider under him, which was pretty nigh as good.

"Steady does it," says Starlight, and he makes a snap shot at the tracker, and breaks his right arm.

"Three men spoiled," says he; "one more to the good and we may charge."

Just as he said this the trooper that was underneath

the dead horse crawls from under him, the off side, and rests his rifle on his wither. Starlight had just mounted when every rifle and pistol in the two parties was fired at one volley. We had drawn closer to one another, and no one seemed to think of cover.

Rainbow rears up, gives one spring, and falls backward with a crush. I thought Starlight was crushed underneath him, shot through the neck and flank as he was, but he saved himself somehow, and stood with his hand on Rainbow's mane, when the old horse rose again all right, head and tail well up, and as steady as a rock. The blood was pouring out of his neck, but he didn't seem to care two straws about it. You could see his nostril spread out and his eye looking twice as big and fiery.

Starlight rests his rifle a minute on the old horse's shoulder, and the man that had fired the shot fell over with a kick. Something hits me in the ribs like a stone, and another on the right arm, which drops down just as I was aiming at a young fellow with light hair that had ridden pretty close up, under a myall tree.

Jim and Sir Ferdinand let drive straight at one another the same minute. They both meant it this time. Sir Ferdinand's hat turned part round on his head, but poor old Jim drops forward on his face and tears up the grass with his hands. I knew what that sign meant.

Goring rides straight at Starlight and calls on him to surrender. He had his rifle on his hip, but he never moved. There he stood, with his hand on the mane of the old horse. "Keep back if you're wise, Goring," says he, as quiet and steady as if he'd been cattle-drafting. "I don't want to have your blood on my head; but if you must—"

Goring had taken so many men in his day that he was got over confident-like. He thought Starlight would give in at the last moment or miss him in the rush. My right arm was broken, and now that Jim was down we might both be took, which would be a great crow for the police. Anyhow, he was a man that didn't know what fear was, and he chanced it.

Two of the other troopers fired point blank at Starlight as Goring rode at him, and both shots told. He never moved, but just lifted his rifle as the other came up at the gallop. Goring threw up his arms, and rolled off his horse a dying man.

Starlight looked at him for a minute.

"We're quits," he says; "it's not once or twice either you've pulled trigger on me. I knew this day would come."

Then he sinks down slowly by the side of the old horse and leans against his fore leg, Rainbow standing quite steady, only tossing his head up and down the old way. I could see, by the stain on Starlight's mouth and the blood on his breast, he'd been shot through the lungs.

I was badly hit, too, and going in the head, though I didn't feel it so much at the time. I began to hear voices like in a dream; then my eyes darkened, and I fell like a log.

When I came to, all the men was off their horses, some round Goring—him they lifted up and propped against a tree; but he was stone dead, anyone could see. Sir Ferdinand was on his knees beside Starlight, talking to him, and the other saying a word now and then, quite composed and quiet-like.

"Close thing, Morringer, wasn't it?" I heard him say. "You were too quick for us; another day and we'd been out of reach."

"True enough. Horses all dead beat; couldn't raise a remount for love or money."

"Well, the game's up now, isn't it? I've held some good cards too, but they never told, somehow. I'm more sorry for Jim—and—that poor girl, Aileen, than I am for myself."

"Don't fret—there's a good fellow. Fortune of war, you know. Anything else?"

Here he closed his eyes, and seemed gone; but he wakes up again, and begins in a dreamy way. His words came slowly, but his voice never altered one bit.

"I'm sorry I fired at poor Warrigal now. No dog ever was more faithful than he has been to me all through till now; but I was vexed at his having sold Dick and poor Jim."

"We knew we should find you here or hereabouts without that," says Sir Ferdinand.

"How was that?"

"Two jockey-boys met you one night at Calga gate; one of them recognized Locket by the white patch on her neck. He wired to us at the next station."

"So you were right, after all, Dick. It was a mistake to take that mare. I've always been confoundedly obstinate; I admit that. Too late to think of it now, isn't it?"

"Anything else I can do?" says Sir Ferdinand.

"Give her this ring," he pulls it off his finger, "and you'll see Maddie Barnes gets the old horse, won't you? Poor old Rainbow! I know she'll take care of him; and a promise is a promise."

"All right. He's the property of the Government now, you know; but I'll square it somehow. The General won't object under the circumstances."

Then he shuts his eyes for a bit. After a while he calls out—

“Dick! Dick Marston.”

“I’m here,” says I.

“If you ever leave this, tell Aileen that her name was the last word I spoke—the very last. She foresaw this day; she told me so. I’ve had a queer feeling, too, this week back. Well, it’s over now. I don’t know that I’m sorry, except for others. I say, Morringer, do you remember the last pigeon match you and I shot in, at Hurlingham?”

“Why, good God!” says Sir Ferdinand, bending down, and looking into his face. “It can’t be; yes, by Jove, it is—”

He spoke some name I couldn’t catch, but Starlight put a finger on his lips, and whispers—

“You won’t tell, will you? Say you won’t?”

The other nodded.

He smiled just like his old self.

“Poor Aileen!” he says, quite faint. His head fell back. Starlight was dead!

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE breath was hardly out of him when a horse comes tearing through the scrub on to the little plain, with a man on his back that seemed hurt, bad, or drunk, he rolled in his saddle so. The head of him was bound up with a white cloth, and what you could see of it was dark-looking, with bloodstains on it. I knew the figure and the seat on a horse, though I couldn’t see his face. He didn’t seem to have much strength, but he was one of those sort of riders that can’t fall off a horse, that is

unless they're dead. Even then you'd have to pull him down. I believe he'd hang on somehow like a dead 'possum on a branch.

It was Warrigal!

They all knew him when he came close up, but none of the troopers raised their pieces or thought of stopping him. If a dead man had rode right into the middle of us he'd have looked like that. He stopped his horse, and slipped off on his feet somehow.

He'd had a dreadful wound, anyone could see. There was blood on the rags that bound his head all up, and being round his forehead and over his chin it made him look more and more like a corpse. Not much you could see, only his eyes, that were burning bright like two coals of fire.

Up to Starlight's body he goes and sits himself down by it. He takes the dead man's head into his lap, looks down at the face, and bursts out into the awfulest sort of crying and lamenting I ever heard of a living man. I've seen the native women mourning for their dead with the blood and tears running down their faces together. I've known them sit for days and nights without stirring from round a corpse, not taking a bite or sup the whole time. I've seen white people that's lost an only child that had, maybe, been all life and spirits an hour before. But in all my life I have never seen no man, nor woman neither, show such regular right-down grief as Warrigal did for his master—the only human creature he loved in the wide world, and him lying stiff on the ground before him.

He lifts up the dead face and wipes the blood from the lips so careful; talks to it in his own language (or leastways his mother's) like a woman over a child. Then he sobbed and groaned and shook all over as if the very life was going out of him. At last he lays the head very

soft and gentle down on the ground and looks round. Sir Ferdinand gives him his handkerchief, and he lays it over the face. Then he turns away from the men that stood round, and got up looking that despairing and wretched that I couldn't help pitying him, though he was the cause of the whole thing as far as we could see.

Sudden as a flash of powder he pulls out a small revolver—a Derringer—Starlight gave him once, and holds it out to me, butt-end first.

"You shoot me, Dick Marston; you shoot me quick," he says. "It's all my fault. I killed him—I killed the Captain. I want to die and go with him to the never-never country parson tell us about—up there!"

One of the troopers knocked his hand up. Sir Ferdinand gave a nod, and a pair of handcuffs were slipped over his wrists.

"You told the police the way I went?" says I. "It's all come out of that."

"Thought they'd grab you at Willaroon," says he, looking at me quite sorrowful with his dark eyes, like a child. "If you hadn't knocked me down that last time, Dick Marston, I'd never have done nothing to you nor Jim. I forgot about the old down. That brought it all back again. I couldn't help it, and when I see Jimmy Wardell I thought they'd catch you and no one else."

"Well, you've made a clean sweep of the lot of us, Warrigal," says I, "poor Jim and all. Don't you ever show yourself to the old man or go back to the Hollow, if you get out of this."

"He's dead now. I'll never hear him speak again," says he, looking over to the figure on the grass. "What's the odds about me?"

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I didn't hear any more; I must have fainted away again. Things came into my head about being taken in a cart back to Cunnamulla, with Jim lying dead on one side of me and Starlight on the other. I was only half-sensible, I expect. Sometimes I thought we were alive, and another time that the three of us were dead and going to be buried.

What makes it worse I've seen that sight so often since—the fight on the plain and the end of it all. Just like a picture it comes back to me over and over again, sometimes in broad day, as I sit in my cell, in the darkest midnight, in the early dawn.

It rises before my eyes—the bare plain, and the dead men lying where they fell; Sir Ferdinand on his horse, with the troopers standing round; and the half-caste sitting with Starlight's head in his lap, rocking himself to and fro, and crying and moaning like a woman that's lost her child.

I can see Jim, too—lying on his face with his hat rolled off and both arms spread out wide. He never moved after. And to think that only the day before he had thought he might see his wife and child again! Poor old Jim! If I shut my eyes they won't go away. It will be the last sight I shall see in this world before—before I'm—

The coroner of the district held an inquest, and the jury found a verdict of "justifiable homicide by Sir Ferdinand Morringer and other members of the police force of New South Wales in the case of one James Marston, charged with robbery under arms, and of a man habitually known as 'Starlight,' but of whose real name there was no evidence before the jury." As for

the police, it was wilful murder against us. Warrigal and I were remanded to Turon court for further evidence, and as soon as we were patched up a bit by the doctor—for both of us looked like making a die of it for two or three weeks—we were started on horseback with four troopers overland all the way back. We went easy stages—we couldn't ride any way fast—both of us handcuffed, and our horses led.

One day, about a fortnight after, as we were crossing a river, Warrigal's horse stopped to drink. It was a swim in the middle of the stream, and the trooper, who was a young chap just from the dépôt, let go his leading rein for a bit. Warrigal had been as quiet as a lamb all the time, and they hadn't a thought of his playing up. I heard a splash, and looked round; his horse's head was turned to the bank, and, before the trooper could get out of the river, he was into the river scrub and away as fast as his horse could carry him. Both the troopers went after him, and we waited half-an-hour, and then went on to the next police station to stop till they came back.

Next day, late, they rode in with their horses regularly done and knocked up, leading his horse, but no Warrigal. He had got clear away from them in the scrub, jumped off his horse when they were out of sight, taken off his boots and made a straight track for the West Bogan scrub. There was about as much chance of running him down there as a brumbie with a day's start or a wallaroo that was seen on a mountain side the week before last. I didn't trouble my head that much to think whether I was glad or sorry. What did it matter? What did anything matter now? The only two men I loved in the world were dead; the two women I loved best left

forsaken and disgraced; and I—well, I was on my way to be hanged!

I was taken along to Turon and put into the gaol, there to await my trial. They didn't give me much of a chance to bolt, and I wouldn't have taken it if they had. I was dead tired of my life, and wouldn't have taken my liberty then and there if they'd given it me. All I wanted was to have the whole thing done and over without any more bother.

It all passed like a dream. The Court was crowded till there wasn't standing room, everyone wanting to get a look at Dick Marston, the famous bushranger. The evidence didn't take so very long. I was proved to have been seen with the rest the day the escort was robbed; the time the four troopers were shot. I was suspected of being concerned in Hagan's party's death, and half-a-dozen other things. Last of all, when Sub-Inspector Goring was killed, and a trooper, besides two others badly wounded.

I was sworn to as being one of the men that fired on the police. I didn't hear a great deal of it, but 'livened up when the Judge put on his black cap and made a speech, not a very long one, telling about the way the law was set at naught by men who had dared to infest the highways of the land and rob peaceful citizens with arms and violence. In the pursuit of gain by such atrocious means, blood had been shed, and murder, wilful murder, had been committed. He would not further allude to the deeds of blood with which the prisoner at the bar stood charged. The only redeeming feature in his career had been brought out by the evidence tendered in his favour by the learned counsel who defended him. He had fought fairly when opposed by the police force,

and he had on more than one occasion acted in concert with the robber known as Starlight, and the brother James Marston, both of whom had fallen in a recent encounter, to protect from violence women who were helpless and in the power of his evil companions. Then the Judge pronounced the sentence that I, Richard Marston, was to be taken from the place whence I came, and there hanged by the neck until I was dead. "And might God have mercy upon my soul!"

My lawyer had beforehand argued that although I had been seen in the company of persons who had doubtless compassed the unlawfully slaying of the Queen's lieges and peace officers, yet no proof had been brought before the Court that day that I had wilfully killed anyone. "He was not aware," would his Honour remark, "that anyone had seen me fire at any man, whether since dead or alive. He would freely admit that I had been seen in bad company, but that fact would not suffice to hang a man under British rule. It was therefore incumbent on the jury to bring in a verdict for his client of 'not guilty.' "

But that cock wouldn't fight. I was found guilty by the jury and sentenced to death by the Judge. I expect I was taken back without seeing or hearing to the gaol, and I found myself alone in the condemned cell, with heavy leg-irons—worn for the first time in my life. The rough and tumble of a bushranger's life was over at last, and this was the finish up.

For the first week or two I didn't feel anything particular. I was hardly awake. Sometimes I thought I must be dreaming—that this man, sitting in a cell, quiet and dull-looking, with heavy irons on his limbs, could

never be Dick Marston, the shearer, the stock-rider, the gold-miner, the bushranger.

This was the end—the end—the end! I used to call it out sometimes louder and louder, till the warder would come in to see if I had gone mad.

Bit by bit I came to my right senses. I almost think I felt sharper and clearer in my head than I had done for ever so long. Then I was able to realize the misery I had come down to after all our blowing and roving. This was the crush-yard and no gateway. I was safe to be hanged in six weeks, or thereabouts—hanged like a dog! Nothing could alter that, and I didn't want it if it could.

And how did the others get on, those that had their lives bound up with ours, so that we couldn't be hurt without their bleeding, almost in their hearts?—that is, mother's bled to death, at any rate; when she heard of Jim's death and my being taken it broke her heart clean; she never held her head up after. Aileen told me in her letter she used to nurse his baby and cry over him all day, talking about her dear boy Jim. She was laid in the burying ground at St. Kilda. As to Aileen, she had long vowed herself to the service of the Virgin. She knew that she was committing sin in pledging herself to an earthly love. She had been punished for her sin by the death of him she loved, and she had settled in her mind to go into the Convent at Soubiaca, where she should be able to wear out her life in prayer for those of her blood who still lived, as well as for the souls of those who lay in the little burying ground on the banks of the far Warrego.

Jeanie settled to stop in Melbourne. She had money

enough to keep her comfortable, and her boy would be brought up in a different style from his father.

As for Gracey, she sent me a letter in which she said she was like the bird that could only sing one song. She would remain true to me in life and death. George was very kind, and would never allow anyone to speak harshly of his former friends. We must wait and make the best of it.

So I was able, you see, to get bits of news even in a condemned cell, from time to time, about the outside world. I learned that Wall and Hulbert and Moran and another fellow were still at large, and following up their old game. Their time, like ours, was drawing short, though.

* * * * *

Well, this has been a thundering long yarn, hasn't it? All my whole life I seem to have lived over again. It didn't take so long in the telling; it's a month to-day since I began. And this life itself has reeled away so quick, it hardly seems a dozen years instead of seven-and-twenty since it began. It won't last much longer. Another week and it will be over. There's a fellow to be strung up before me, for murdering his wife. The scoundrel, I wonder how he feels?

I've had visitors too; some I never thought to see inside this gaol wall. One day who should come in but Mr. Falkland and his daughter. There was a young gentleman with them that they told me was an English lord, a baronet, or something of that sort, and was to be married to Miss Falkland. She stood and looked at me with her big innocent eyes, so pitiful and kind-like. I could have thrown myself down at her feet. Mr. Falkland talked away, and asked me about this and that. He

seemed greatly interested. When I told him about the last fight, and of poor Jim being shot dead, and Starlight dying alongside the old horse, the tears came into Miss Falkland's eye's and she cried for a bit, quite feeling and natural.

Mr. Falkland asked me all about the robbery at Mr. Knightley's, and took down a lot of things in his pocket-book. I wondered what he did that for.

When they said good-bye Mr. Falkland shook hands with me, and said "he hoped to be able to do some good for me, but not to build anything on the strength of it."

Then Miss Falkland came forward and held out her beautiful hand to me—to me, as sure as you live—like a regular thoroughbred angel, as she always was. It very nigh cooked me. I felt so queer and strange, I couldn't have spoken a word to save my life.

Sir George, or whatever his name was, didn't seem to fancy it over much, for he said—

"You colonists are strange people. Our friend here may think himself highly favoured."

Miss Falkland turned towards him and held up her head, looking like a queen, as she was, and says she—

"If you had met me in the last place where I saw this man and his brother, you would not wonder at my avowing my gratitude to both of them. I should despise myself if I did not. Poor Jim saved my life on one occasion, and on another, but far more dreadful day, he—but words, mere words, can never express my deep thankfulness for his noble conduct, and were he here now I would tell him so, and give him my hand, if all the world stood by."

Sir George didn't say anything after that, and she swept out of the cell, followed by Falkland and him. It

was just as well for him to keep a quiet tongue in his head. I expect she was a great heiress as well as a great beauty, and people of that sort, I've found, mostly get listened to when they speak. When the door shut I felt as if I'd seen the wings of an angel flit through it, and the prison grew darker and darker like the place of lost souls.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ONE day I was told that a lady wanted to see me. When the door of the cell opened who should walk in but Aileen! I didn't look to have seen her. I didn't bother my head about who was coming. What did it matter, as I kept thinking, who came or who went for the week or two that was to pass before the day? Yes, the day, that Thursday, when poor Dick Marston would walk over the threshold of his cell, and never walk over one again.

The warder—him that stopped with me day and night—every man in the condemned cell has to be watched like that—stepped outside the door and left us together. We both looked at one another. She was dressed all in black, and her face was that pale I hardly knew her at first. Then she said, "Oh! Dick—my poor Dick! is this the way we meet?" and flings herself into my arms. How she cried and sobbed, to be sure. The tears ran down her cheeks like rain, and every time the leg-irons rattled she shook and trembled as if her heart was breaking.

I tried to comfort her; it was no use.

"Let me cry on, Dick," she said; "I have not shed a tear since I first heard the news—the miserable truth that has crushed all our vain hopes and fancies; my heart

has nearly burst for want of relief. This will do me good. To think—to think that this should be the end of all! But it is just! I cannot dare to doubt Heaven's mercy. What else could we expect, living as we all did—in sin—in mortal sin? I am punished rightly."

She told me all about poor mother's death. She never held up her head after she heard of Jim's death. She never said a hard word about anyone. It was God's will, she thought, and only for His mercy things might have gone worse. The only pleasure she had in her last days was in petting Jim's boy. He was a fine little chap, and had eyes like his father, poor old Jim! Then Aileen broke down altogether, and it was a while before she could speak again.

Jeanie was the same as she had been from the first, only so quiet they could hardly know how much she felt. She wouldn't leave the little cottage where she had been so happy with Jim, and liked to work in the chair opposite to where Jim used to sit and smoke his pipe in the evenings. Most of her friends lived in Melbourne, and she reckoned to stay there for the rest of her life.

As to father, they had never heard a word from him—hardly knew whether he was dead or alive. There was some kind of report that Warrigal had been seen making towards Nulla Mountain, looking very weak and miserable, on a knocked-up horse; but they did not know whether it was true or false.

Poor Aileen stopped till we were all locked up for the night. She seemed as if she couldn't bear to leave me. She had no more hope or tie in life, she said. I was the only one of her people she was likely to see again, and this was the last time—the last time.

"Oh, Dick! oh, my poor lost brother," she said, "how

clearly I seem to see all things now. Why could we not do so before? I have had my sinful worldly dream of happiness, and death has ended it. When I heard of his death and Jim's my heart turned to stone. All the strength I have shall be given to religion from this out. I can ease my heart and mortify the flesh for the good of my soul. To God—to the Holy Virgin—who hears the sorrows of such as me, I can pray day and night for their souls' welfare—for mine, for yours. And, oh! Dick, think when that day, that dreadful day, comes that Aileen is praying for you—will pray for you till her own miserable life ends. And now good-bye; we shall meet on this earth no more. Pray—say that you will pray—pray now that we may meet in Heaven.”

She half drew me to my knees. She knelt down herself on the cold stone floor of the cell; and I—well—I seemed to remember the old days when we were both children and used to kneel down by mother's bed, the three of us, Aileen in the middle and one of us boys on each side. The old time came back to me, and I cried like a child.

I wasn't ashamed of it; and when she stood up and said, “Good-bye—good-bye, Dick,” I felt a sort of rushing of the blood to my head, and all my wounds seemed as if they would break out again. I very near fell down, what with one thing and another. I sat myself down on my bed, and I hid my face in my hands. When I looked up she was gone.

* * * * *

After that, day after day went on and I scarcely kept count, until somehow I found out it was the last week. They partly told me on the Sunday. The parson—a good, straight, manly man he was—he had me told for

fear I should go too close up to it, and not have time to prepare.

Prepare! How was a man like me to prepare? I'd done everything I'd a mind to for years and years. Some good things—some bad—mostly bad. How was I to repent? Just to say I was sorry for them. I wasn't that particular sorry either—that was the worst of it. A deal of the old life was dashed good fun, and I'd not say, if I had the chance, that I wouldn't do just the same over again.

Sometimes I felt as if I ought to understand what the parson tried to hammer into my head; but I couldn't do anything but make a jumble of it. It came natural to me to do some things, and I did them. If I had stopped dead and bucked at father's wanting me and Jim to help duff those weaners, I really believe all might have come right. Jim said afterwards he'd made up his mind to have another try at getting me to join with George Storefield in that fencing job. After that we could have gone into the outside station work with him—just the thing that would have suited the pair of us; and what a grand finish we might have made of it if we ran a waiting race; and where were we now?—Jim dead, Aileen dead to the world, and me to be hanged on Thursday, poor mother dead and broken-hearted before her time. We couldn't have done worse. We might, we must have, done better.

I did repent in that sort of way of all we'd done since that first wrong turn. It's the wrong turn-off that makes a man lose his way; but as for the rest I had only a dull, heavy feeling that my time was come, and I must make the best of it, and meet it like a man.

So the day came. The last day! What a queer

feeling it was when I lay down that night, that I should never want to sleep again, or try to do it. That I had seen the sun set—leastways the day grow dark—for the last time; the very last time.

Somehow I wasn't that much in fear of it as you might think; it was strange like, but made one pull himself together a bit. Thousands and millions of people had died in all sorts of ways and shapes since the beginning of the world. Why shouldn't I be able to go through with it like another?

I was a long time lying and thinking before I thought of sleeping. All the small, teeny bits of a man's life, as well as the big, seemed to come up before me as I lay there—the first things I could recollect at Rocky Flat; then the pony; mother a youngish woman; father always hard-looking, but so different from what he came to be afterwards. Aileen a little girl, with her dark hair falling over her shoulders; then a grown woman, riding her own horse, and full of smiles and fun; then a pale, weeping woman all in black, looking like a mourner at a funeral. Jim, too, and Starlight—now galloping along through the forest at night—laughing, drinking, enjoying themselves at Jonathan Barnes's, with the bright eyes of Bella and Maddie shining with fun and devilment.

Then both of them lying dead at the flat by Murrynebone Creek.—Starlight with the half-caste making his wild moan over him; Jim, quiet in death as in life, lying in the grass, looking as if he had slid off his horse in that hot weather to take a banje; and now, no get away, the rope—the hangman!

I must have gone to sleep, after all, for the sun was shining into the cell when I stirred, and I could see the chains on my ankles that I had worn all these weary

weeks. How could I sleep? But I had, for all that. It was daylight; more than that—sunrise. I listened, and, sure enough, I heard two or three of the bush-birds calling. It reminded me of being a boy again, and listening to the birds at dawn just before it was time to get up. When I was a boy!—was I ever a boy? How long was it ago—and now—Oh my God, my God! That ever it should have come to this! What am I waiting for to hear now? The tread of men; the smith that knocks the irons off the limbs that are so soon to be as cold as the jangling chains. Yes! at last I hear their footsteps—here they come!

The warder, the blacksmith, the parson, the head-gaoler, just as I expected. The smith begins to cut the rivets. Somehow they none of them look so solemn as I expected. Surely when a man is to be killed by law, choked to death in cold blood, people might look a bit serious. Mind you, I believe men ought to be hanged. I don't hold with any of that rot that them as commits murder shouldn't pay for it with their own lives. It's the only way they can pay for it, and make sure they don't do it again. Some men can stand anything but the rope. Prison walls don't frighten them, but Jack Ketch does. They can't gammon him.

"Knock off his irons quick," says Mr. Fairleigh, the parson; "he will not want them again just yet."

"I didn't think you would make a joke of that sort, sir," says I. "It's a little hard on a man, ain't it? But we may as well take it cheerful, too."

"Tell him all, Mr. Strickland," he says to the head-gaoler. "I see he can bear it now."

"Prisoner Richard Marston," says the gaoler, standing up before me, "it becomes my duty to inform you that,

owing to representations made in your favour by the Hon. Mr. Falkland, the Hon. Mr. Storefield, and other gentlemen who have interested themselves in your case, setting forth the facts that, although mixed up with criminals and known to be present when the escort and various other cases of robbery under arms have taken place, wherein life has been taken, there is no distinct evidence of your having personally taken life. On the other hand, in several instances, yourself, with the late James Marston and the deceased person known as Starlight, have aided in the protection of life and property. The Governor and the Executive Council have therefore graciously been pleased to commute your sentence of death to that of 15 years' imprisonment."

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When I came to I was lying on my blankets in a different cell, as I could see by the shape of it. The irons didn't rattle when I moved. I was surprised when I looked and saw they were took off. Bit by bit it all came back to me. I was not to be hanged. My life was saved, if it was worth saving, by the two or three good things we'd done in our time, and almost, I thought, more for poor old Jim's sake than my own.

Was I glad or sorry now it was all over? I hardly knew. For a week or two I felt as if they'd better have finished me off when I was ready and ha' done with me, but after a while I began to feel different. Then the gaoler talked to me a bit. He never said much to prisoners, and what he said he meant.

"Prisoner Marston," says he, "you'd better think over your situation and don't mope. Make up your mind like a man. You may have friends that you'd like to live for. Pull yourself together and face your sentence like a man.

You're a young man now, and you won't be an old one when you're let out. If your conduct is uniformly good you'll be out in twelve years. Settle yourself to serve that—and you're a lucky man to have no more—and you may have some comfort in your life yet."

Then he went out. He didn't wait to see what effect it had on me. If I wasn't a fool, he thought to himself, I must take it in; if I was, nothing would do me any good.

I took his advice, and settled myself down to think it over. It was a good while—a weary lot of years to wait, year by year—but, still, if I got out in twelve years I should not be so out and out broke down after all—not much over forty, and there's a deal of life for a man sometimes after that.

And then I knew that there would be one that would be true to me anyhow, that would wait for me when I went out, and that would not be too proud to join in her life with mine, for all that had come and gone. Well, this might give me strength. I don't think anything else could, and from that hour I made up my mind to tackle it steady and patient, to do the best I could, and to work out my sentence, thankful for the mercy that had been showed me, and if ever a man was in this world, resolved to keep clear of all cross ways for the future.

So I began to steady myself and tried to bear it the best way I could. Other men were in for long sentences, and they seemed to be able to keep alive, so why shouldn't I? Just at the first I wasn't sure whether I could. Year after year to be shut up there, with the grass growin' and the trees wavin' outside, and the world full of people, free to walk or ride, to work or play, people that had wives and children, and friends and relations—it seemed awful. That I should be condemned

to live in this shut-up tomb all those long, weary years, and there was nothing else for it. I couldn't eat or sleep at first, and kept starting up at night, thinking they was coming for me to carry me off to the gallows. Then I'd dream that Jim and Starlight was alive, and that we'd all got out of gaol and were riding through the bush at night to the Hollow again. Then I'd wake up and know they were dead and I was here. Time after time I've done that, and I was that broken down and low that I burst out crying like a child.

After a bit I got better, and began to get settled into the life that was before me. The first thing I did was to take up a trade. I'd always been a decentish hand at bush carpentering, so I took up the trade in earnest, and very soon learned how to do the finer bits of work that I never durst tackle when I was free. It kept me from thinking too much, and tired me so as I could sleep sound, and when the warder that was over the working prisoners praised me and said I was the best working chap of the lot I felt quite pleased. Pleased!—think of that. I wouldn't have believed it of myself. Somehow or other we got to hear all the news that was going on from time to time. I used to hear about Wall and Hulbert and Moran, everything they did, and every time the police chased 'em. Sir Ferdinand made up his mind one night that he'd got Joe Wall quite to rights. He and his men surrounded the hut he was in. They'd got information from the man that used to bring him rations, and they were safe to have him as soon as he came out. Sir Ferdinand was that set on taking him himself that he ordered his men not to fire. Just about daylight out comes Wall on a grey horse. He rides almost up to Sir Ferdinand before he sees him, who calls out "Stand!"

and pulls trigger on him. Dashed if his revolver didn't miss fire, and Wall goes from the jump and gets clean off. However, Wall—and he wasn't a bad sort, neither (never did an unmanly act that I know of)—didn't last long. The police surrounded another hut they'd tracked him to that night, and Inspector Merlin—he was a cool card, if you like—shot him clean through the body with a green cartridge out of his breechloader. The men gave him a volley besides, and there was three-and-twenty bullets in him when he was turned over. Hulbert was caught much in the same way, and shot down without giving him a chance.

Moran took to doing business on his own hook after that, and got right away down south, below Wagga Wagga and opposite Narrandera, in the pine scrubs about there; and then he would make a run to Albury and cross into Victoria. I always knew he'd do that once too often. He was such a cruel devil, too, and he seemed to get worse and worse.

One day he stuck up Bateson's wool-shed at Round Hill. There was twenty or thirty shearers there; but when he marched in with his revolver pointed at the crowd, and said, "I'm Moran," there wasn't a man among 'em as had the pluck to rise a rush. One or two might have been hit, and nobody liked to be them. That was about the size of it. I don't say much for the working men that one fellow with a pistol can make a couple of dozen of 'em go on their knees almost. But it isn't want of spirit as some people might think, only they've got so into the way of thinking it's the work of the police to do all that kind of thing, and that it's none of their business. When they think it's good enough they can fight fast enough, and stand the steel spurs, too.

However, Moran, after they'd all given in, began to bully as usual, and got out the rum and made all of them have a glass of grog or two, including Sam Bateson, the manager. He was going away all right, when Sam calls out to him, "Where did you get your spurs, Moran?" or some such nonsense. The grog must have got into his head.

Moran turns round and fires point blank at him. He put up his hand, and the bullet went slap through the palm of it. Then he fires another shot at random into the crowd. It went through the ankle of a poor young colonial-experience lad, and left him groaning and moaning with the pain.

Moran seemed sorry for this like, and told another youngster he might go for the doctor. So the young fellow gets his horse and rides away along the road towards where the doctor lived.

Moran takes a sudden thought a few minutes after, and starts off at full gallop himself. He pulls up the young chap on the road, and pulls out his pistol. "You're not going for the doctor, blast you," says he; "you're going for the police," and before the poor young chap has time to answer he shoots him dead—dead. There was no mistake about that. Now, a man who could do that must either be mad or one of the cruellest brutes that ever lived.

Next week he suddenly gallops up alongside Sergeant M'Gillicuddy and shoots him dead before he had time to draw his pistol, or say one word. But his time was pretty close up. One day he sneaked up to a station on the Victoria side of the river—he was always crawling about like a Red Indian—and sticks it up. He made himself a great man, and played up all his old tricks,

He helped himself to the best, and made the young ladies play to him on the piano, and all that sort of thing. While he was enjoying himself the New South Wales police came up on his tracks and surrounded the house. He made pretty sure no one left the house, he thought, but in spite of his cunning a smart lass of a servant-girl crept out of the house and told the people outside all about him. Some of the station hands had come up, too, and when he walked out of the house at daylight one of the men, who was a good rifle shot, let him have it, and down went Dan Moran with a bullet through him.

When they got round him there he was safe enough, like a hawk with his wing broken, ready enough for mischief, but not up to it. He made a great barney about being shot without warning, but what warning had he ever given to lots of people that he shot or come down sudden on? No! he was like a dingo in a trap, or a snake with his back broken on the coals. He might growl, or hiss, or writhe about, but nobody pitied him, not even men like us. He was a cruel, treacherous, unmanly brute, and he came to his end just the very way as Starlight said he would after that affair at Kadombla.

I expected every day to hear that Billy the Boy had got caught and had up for something. The young scamp was going the road to the gallows as fast as he could split, but one day he got a check. That put the fear of God in his heart, and he never chanced it, I believe, on the sticking-up lay from that day to this.

The way it came about was this: He and another fellow, a sort of off-side bushranger chap, named Withers, were out seeing what they could do on the quiet, meaning to go back home and pretend to be working on their

farms as usual. They saw old Mr. Wilbertree coming along in his buggy, and knowing he always carried a gold watch and was never without a few notes and sovereigns they settled to have him. So they put on their masks and rode up to him from behind a rise, just on a bit of open ground, and bailed him up.

Now the old gentleman was as brave as a lion and very fond of shooting. He mostly carried his double-barrel with him in the buggy, ready for a wild turkey or a couple of black duck. It was lying on the rug between his feet, and they didn't see it, being rather nervous. Shows how hard it is for a man to be up to everything. The old gentleman gets out quiet enough; but as he does he pulls the gun after him, and lets drive from the hip at Withers. He got the cartridge full in the chest, and tumbles off his horse a dead man. Billy was off like a red-shank, screwing his shoulders as he went, and never looked behind him, expecting the second. Mr. Wilbertree could have dropped him easy enough with the other barrel; but he was a tender-hearted old chap, with all his courage, and he thought to himself, "Well, he's a young fellow, he may amend; let him have his chance." And he let him slide; so that accounted for another one of the lot. I believe the old gentleman was nervous for a long while after, and quite grieved to have to take a fellow-creature's life. I wouldn't have cared a rap if I'd been him. No! not if I'd shot ten like him, any more than if they'd been dingoes. Men like us are as bad as dingoes, often a plaguey sight worse, and the sooner they're hanged or shot the better. That's my tip, and I don't care who sees it. It's a queer thing, but the only people that ever showed fight against us except the police were the gentlemen—the swells as we called them

—and a good share of the fellows shot dropped to their guns.

The regular station hands, the small farmers, and the labourers didn't trouble their heads about us. They'd eat out of the same dish, and there was no chance of their informing against us unless they had some very particular reason of their own. They'd rather help us a bit, and often did.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE months went on till I began to think it was a long time since anything had been heard of father. I didn't expect to have a letter or anything, but I knew he must take a run outside now and again; and so sure as he did it would come to my ears somehow.

One day I had a newspaper passed in to me. It was against the regulations, but I did get it for all that, and this was the first thing I saw:—

“STRANGE DISCOVERY IN THE TURON DISTRICT.

“A remarkable natural formation, leading to curious results, was last week accidentally hit upon by a party of prospectors, and by them made known to the police of the district. It may tend to solve the doubts which for the last few years have troubled the public at large with respect to the periodical disappearance of a certain gang of bushrangers now broken up.

“Accident led the gold miners, who were anxious to find a practicable track to the gullies at the foot of Nulla Mountain, to observe a narrow winding way apparently

leading over the brow of the precipice on its western face. To their surprise, half hidden by a fallen tree, they discovered a difficult but practicable track down a gully which finally opened out into a broad well-grassed valley of considerable extent, in which cattle and horses were grazing.

"No signs of human habitation were at first visible, but after a patient search a cave in the eastern angle of the range was discovered. Fires had been lighted habitually near the mouth, and near a log two saddles and bridles—long unused—lay in the tall grass. Hard by was stretched the body of a man of swarthy complexion. Upon examination the skull was found to be fractured, as if by some blunt instrument. A revolver of small size lay on his right side.

"Proceeding to the interior of the cave, which had evidently been used as a dwelling for many years past, they came upon the corpse of another man, in a sitting posture, propped up against the wall. One arm rested upon an empty spirit-keg, beside which were a tin pannikin and a few rude cooking utensils. At his feet lay the skeleton of a dog. The whole group had evidently been dead for a considerable time. Further search revealed large supplies of clothes, saddlery, arms, and ammunition—all placed in recesses of the cave—besides other articles which would appear to have been deposited in that secure receptacle many years since.

"As may be imagined, a large amount of interest and even excitement was caused when the circumstances, as reported to the police, became generally known. A number of our leading citizens, together with many of the adjoining station holders, at once repaired to the spot. No difficulty was felt in identifying the bodies as those

of Ben Marston, the father of the two bushrangers of that name, and of Warrigal, the half-caste follower always seen in attendance upon the chief of the gang, the celebrated Starlight.

“How the last members of this well-known, long-dreaded gang of freebooters had actually perished can only be conjectured, but taking the surrounding circumstances into consideration, and the general impression abroad that Warrigal was the means of putting the police upon the track of Richard Marston, which led indirectly to the death of his master and of James Marston, the most probable solution would seem to be that, after a deep carouse, the old man had taxed Warrigal with his treachery and brained him with the American axe found close to the body. He had apparently then shot himself to avoid a lingering death, the bullet found in his body having been probably fired by the half-caste as he was advancing upon him axe in hand.

“The dog, well known by the name of Crib, was the property and constant companion of Ben Marston, the innocent accomplice in many of his most daring stock-raids. Faithful unto the end, with the deep, uncalculating love which shames so often that of man, the dumb follower had apparently refused to procure food for himself, and pined to death at the feet of his dead master. Though the philanthropist may regret the untimely and violent end of men whose courage and energy fitted them for better things, it cannot be denied that the gain to society far exceeds the loss.

“When the recesses of the Hollow were fully explored, traces of rude but apparently successful gold workings were found in the creeks which run through this romantic valley—long as invisible as the fabled gold cities of Mexico.

"We may venture to assert that no great time will be suffered to elapse ere the whole of the alluvial will be taken up, and the Terrible Hollow, which some of the older settlers assert to be its real name, will re-echo with the sound of pick and shovel; perhaps to be the means of swelling those escorts which its former inhabitants so materially lessened.

"With regard to the stock pasturing in the valley, a puzzling problem presented itself when they came to be gathered up and yarded. The adjoining settlers who had suffered from the depredations of the denizens of the Hollow were gladly expectant of the recovery of animals of great value. To their great disappointment, only a small number of the very aged bore any brand which could be sworn to and legally claimed. The more valuable cattle and horses, evidently of the choicest quality and the highest breeding, resembled very closely individuals of the same breed stolen from the various proprietors. But they were either unbranded or branded with a letter and numbers to which no stock-owners in the district could lay claim.

"Provoking, as well as perplexing, was this unique state of matters—wholly without precedent. For instance, Mr. Rouncival and his stud-groom could almost have sworn to the big slashing brown mare, the image of the long-lost celebrity Termagant, with the same crooked blaze down the face, the same legs, the same high croup and peculiar way of carrying her head. She corresponded exactly in age to the date on which the grand thoroughbred mare, just about to bring forth, had disappeared from Buntagong. No reasonable doubt existed as to the identity of this valuable animal, followed as she was by several of her progeny, equally aristocratic in appearance.

Still, as these interesting individuals had never been seen by their rightful owners, it was impossible to prove a legal title.

"The same presumptive certainty and legal incompleteness existed concerning Mr. Bowe's shorthorns (as he averred) and Mr. Dawson's Devons.

" 'Thou art so near and yet so far,'

as a provoking stock-rider hummed. Finally, it was decided by the officials in charge to send the whole collection to the public pound, when each proprietor might become possessed of his own, with a good and lawful title in addition—for 'a consideration'—and to the material benefit of the Government coffers."

So it was this way the poor old Hollow was dropped on to, and the well-hidden secret blown for ever and ever. Well, it had been a good plant for us and them as had it before our time. I don't expect there'll ever be such a place again, take it all round.

And that was the end of father! Poor old dad! game to the last. And the dog, too!—wouldn't touch bit or sup after the old man dropped. Just like Crib that was! Often and often I used to wonder what he saw in father to be so fond of him. He was about the only creature in the wide world that was fond of dad—except mother, perhaps, when she was young. She'd rather got wore out of her feelings for him, too. But Crib stuck to him to his end—faithful till death, as some of them writing coves says.

And Warrigal! I could see it all, sticking out as plain as a fresh track after rain. He'd come back to the Hollow, like a fool—in spite of me warning him—or because he had nowhere else to go. And the first time

dad had an extra glass in his head he tackled him about giving me away and being the means of the other two's death. Then he'd got real mad and run at him with the axe. Warrigal had fired as he came up, and hit him, too; but couldn't stop him in the rush. Dad got in at him, and knocked his brains out there and then. Afterwards, he'd sat down and drank himself pretty well blind; and then, finding the pains coming on him, and knowing he couldn't live, finished himself off with his own revolver.

It was just the way I expected he would make an ending. He couldn't do much all alone in his line. The reward was a big one, and there would be always someone ready to earn it. Jim and Starlight were gone, and I was as good as dead. There wasn't much of a call for him to keep alive. Anyhow, he died game, and paid up all scores, as he said himself.

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I don't know that there's much more for me to say. Here I am boxed up, like a scrubber in a pound, year after year—and years after that—for I don't know how long. However, oh, my God! how ever shall I stand it? Here I lie, half my time in a place where the sun never shines, locked up at five o'clock in my cell, and the same door with never a move in it till six o'clock next morning. A few hours' walk in a prison yard, with a warder on the wall with a gun in his hand overhead. Then locked up again, Sundays and weekdays, no difference. Sometimes I think they'd better have hanged me right off. If I feel all these things now I've only been a few months doing my sentence, how about next year, and the year after that, and so on, and so on? Why, it seems as if it would mount up to more than a

man's life—to ten lives—and then to think how easy it might all have been saved.

There's only one thing keeps me alive; only for that I'd have starved to death for want of having the heart to eat or drink either, or else have knocked my brains out against the wall when one of them low fits came over me. That one thing's the thought of Gracey Storefield.

She couldn't come to me, she wrote, just yet, but she'd come within the month, and I wasn't to fret about her, because whether it was ten years or twenty years if she was alive she'd meet me the day after I was free, let who will see her. I must be brave and keep up my spirits for her sake and Aileen's, who, though she was dead to the world, would hear of my being out, and would always put my name in her prayers. Neither she nor I would be so very old, and we might have many years of life reasonably happy yet in spite of all that had happened. So the less I gave way and made myself miserable, the younger I should look and feel when I came out. She was sure I repented truly of what I had done wrong in the past; and she for one, and George—good, old, kind George—had said he would go bail that I would be one of the squarest men in the whole colony for the future. So I was to live on, and hope and pray God to lighten our lot for her sake.

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It must be years and years since that time as I last wrote about. Awful long and miserable the time went at first; now it don't go so slow somehow. I seemed to have turned a corner. How long is it? It must be a hundred years. I have had different sorts of feelings. Sometimes I feel ashamed to be alive. I think the man

that knocked his head against the wall of his cell the day he was sentenced and beat his brains out in this very gaol had the best of it. Other times I take things quite easy, and feel as if I could wait quite easy, and feel as if I could wait quite comfortable and patient-like till the day came. But—will it? Can it ever come that I shall be a free man again?

People have come to see me a many times, most of them the first year or two I was in. After that they seemed to forget me, and get tired of coming. It didn't make much odds.

But one visitor I had regular after the first month or two. Gracey, poor Gracey, used to come and see me twice a year. She said it wouldn't do her or me any good to come oftener, and George didn't want her to. But them two times she always comes, and, if it wasn't for that, I don't think I'd ever have got through with it. The worst of it was I used to be that low and miserable after she went, for days and days after, that it was much as I could do to keep from giving in altogether. After a month was past I'd begin to look forward to the next time.

When I'd done over eleven years—eleven years! how did I ever do it? but the time passed, and passed somehow—I got word that they that I knew of was making a try to see if I couldn't be let out when I'd done twelve years. My regular sentence was fifteen, and little enough too. Anyhow, they knock off a year or two from most of the long-sentence men's time, if they've behaved themselves well in gaol, and can show a good conduct ticket right through.

Well, I could do that. I was too low and miserable to fight much when I went in; besides, I never could see

the pull of kicking up rows and giving trouble in a place like that. They've got you there fast enough, and any man that won't be at peace himself, or let others be, is pretty sure to get the worst of it. I'd seen others try it, and never seen no good come of it. It's like a dog on the chain that growls and bites at all that comes near him. A man can take a sapling and half kill him, and the dog never gets a show unless he breaks his chain, and that don't happen often.

Well, I'd learned carpentering and had a turn at mat-making and a whole lot of other things. They kept me from thinking, as I said before, and the neater I did 'em and the more careful I worked the better it went with me. As for my mats, I came quite to be talked about on account of 'em. I drew a regular good picture of Rainbow, and worked it out on a mat with different coloured thrums, and the number of people who came to see that mat, and the notice they took of it, would surprise anyone.

When my twelve years was within a couple of months or so of being up I began to hear that there was a deal of in-and-out sort of work about my getting my freedom. Old George Storefield and Mr. Falkland—both of 'em in the Upper House—and one or two more people that had some say with the Government, was working back and edge for me. There was a party on the other side that wasn't willing as I should lose a day or an hour of my sentence, and that made out I ought to have been hanged "right away," as old Arizona Bill would have said when I was first taken. Well, I don't blame any of 'em for that; but if they could have known the feelings of a man that's done a matter of twelve years, and thinks he might—yes, might—smell the fresh air and feel the grass

under his feet in a week or two—well, they'd perhaps consider a bit.

Whatever way it came out I couldn't say, but the big man of the Government people at that time—the Minister that had his say in all these sort of things—took it into his head that I'd had about enough of it, if I was to be let out at all; that the steel had been pretty well taken out of me, and that, from what he knew of my people and so on, I wasn't likely to trouble the Government again. And he was right. All I wanted was to be let out a pardoned man, that had done bad things, and helped in worse; but had paid—and paid dear, God knows—for every pound he'd got crooked and every day he'd wasted in cross-work. If I'd been sent back for them three years, I do r'aly believe something of dad's old savage blood would have come uppermost in me, and I'd have turned reckless and revengeful like to my life's end.

Anyhow, as I said before, the Minister—he'd been into the gaol and had a look once or twice—made up his mind to back me right out; and he put it so before the Governor that he gave an order for my pardon to be made out, or for me to be discharged the day my twelve years was up, and to let off the other three, along of my good behaviour in the gaol, and all the rest of it.

This leaked out somehow, and there was the deuce's own barney over it. When some of the Parliament men and them sort of coves in the country that never forgives anybody heard of it they began to buck, and no mistake. You'd have thought every bushranger that ever had been shipped in New South Wales had been hanged or kept in gaol till he died; nothing but petitions and letters to the papers; no end of bobbery. The only paper that

had a word to say on the side of a poor devil like me was the *Turon Star*. He said that "Dick Marston and his brother Jim, not to mention Starlight (who paid his debts at any rate, unlike some people he could name who had signed their names to this petition), had worked manly and true at the Turon diggings for over a year. They were respected by all who knew them, and had they not been betrayed by a revengeful woman might have lived thenceforth a life of industry and honourable dealing. He, for one, upheld the decision of the Chief Secretary. Thousands of the Turon miners, men of worth and intelligence, would do the same."

The Governor hadn't been very long in the colony, and they tried it on all roads to get him to go back on his promise to me. They began bullying, and flattering, and preaching at him if such a notorious criminal as Richard Marston was to be allowed to go forth with a free pardon after a comparatively short—short, think of that, short!—imprisonment, what a bad example it will be to the rising generation, and so on.

They managed to put the thing back for a week or two till I was nearly drove mad with fretting, and being doubtful which way it would go.

Lucky for me it was, and for some other people as well, the Governor was one of those men that takes a bit of trouble and considers over a thing before he says yes or no. When he says a thing he sticks to it. When he goes forward a step he puts his foot down, and all the blowing, and cackle, and yelping in the world won't shift him.

Whether the Chief Secretary would have taken my side if he'd known what a dust the thing would have

raised, and how near his Ministers—or whatever they call 'em—was to going out along with poor Dick Marston, I can't tell. Some people say he wouldn't. Anyhow, he stuck to his word; and the Governor just said he'd given his decision about the matter, and he hadn't the least intention of altering it—which showed he knew something of the world, as well as intended to be true to his own opinions. The whole thing blew over after a bit, and the people of the country soon found out that there wasn't such another Governor (barrin' one) as the Queen had the sending out of.

The day it was all settled the head gaoler comes to me, and says he, "Richard Marston, the Governor and Council has been graciously pleased to order that you be discharged from Her Majesty's gaol upon the completion of twelve years of imprisonment; the term of three years' further imprisonment being remitted on account of your uniform good conduct while in the said gaol. You are now free!"

I heard it all as if it had been the parson reading out of a book about some other man. The words went into my ears and out again. I hardly heard them, only the last word, free—free—free! What a blessed word it is! I couldn't say anything, or make a try to walk out. I sat down on my blankets on the floor, and wondered if I was going mad. The head gaoler walked over to me, and put his hand on my shoulder. He was a kind enough man, but, from being "took in" so often, he was cautious. "Come, Dick," he says, "pull yourself together. It's a shake for you, I daresay, but you'll be all right in a day or so. I believe you'll be another man when you get out, and give the lie to these fellows that say you'll be up to your old tricks in a month. I'll back you

to go straight; if you don't you're not the man I take you for."

I got up and steadied myself. "I thank you with all my heart, Mr. ——," I said. "I'm not much of a talker, but you'll see, you'll see; that's the best proof. The fools, do they think I want to come back here? I wish some of them had a year of it."

As soon as there was a chance of my going out I had been allowed to "grow," as they call it in there. That is, to leave off having my face scraped every morning by the prison barber with his razor, that was sometimes sharp and more times rough enough to rasp the skin off you, particularly if it was a cold morning. My hair was let alone, too. My clothes—the suit I was taken in twelve years ago—had been washed and cleaned and folded up, and put away and numbered in a room with a lot of others. I remember I'd got 'em new just before I started away from the Hollow. They was brought to me, and very well they looked, too. I never had a suit that lasted that long before.

That minds me of a yarn I heard at Jonathan Barnes's one day. There was a young chap that they used to call "Liverpool Jack" about then. He was a free kind of fellow, and good-looking, and they all took to him. He went away rather sudden, and they heard nothing of him for about three years. Then he came back, and as it was the busy season old Jonathan put him on, and gave him work. It was low water with him, and he seemed glad to get a job.

When the old man came in he says, "Who do you think came up the road to-day?—Liverpool Jack. He looked rather down on his luck, so I gave him a job to

mend up the barn. He's a handy fellow. I wonder he doesn't save more money. He's a careful chap, too."

"Careful," says Maddie. "How do ye make that out?"

"Why," says Jonathan, "I'm dashed if he ain't got the same suit of clothes on he had when he was here three years ago."

The old man didn't tumble, but both the girls burst out laughing. He'd been in the jug all the time!

I dressed myself in my own clothes—how strange it seemed—even to the boots, and then I looked in the glass. I hadn't done that lately. I regularly started back; I didn't know myself; I came into prison a big, stout, brown-haired chap, full of life, and able to jump over a dray and bullocks almost. I did once jump clean over a pair of polers for a lark.

And how was I going out? A man with a set kind of face, neither one thing nor the other, as if he couldn't be glad or sorry, with a fixed staring look about the eyes, a half-yellowish skin, with a lot of wrinkles in it, particularly about the eyes, and grey hair. Big streaks of grey in the hair of the head, and as for my beard it was white—white. I looked like an old man, and walked like one. What was the use of my going out at all?

When I went outside the walls by a small gate the head gaoler shook hands with me. "You're a free man now, Dick," he says, "and remember this—no man can touch you. No man has the right to pull you up or lay a finger on you. You're as independent as the best gentleman in the land so long as you keep straight. Remember that. I see there's a friend waiting for you."

Sure enough there was a man that I knew, and that lived near Rocky Flat. He was a quiet, steady-going sort of farmer, and never would have no truck with us.

in our flash times. He was driving a spring-cart, with a good sort of horse in it.

"Come along with me, Dick," says he. "I'm going your way, and I promised George Storefield I'd call and give you a lift home. I'm glad to see you out again, and there's a few more round Rocky Flat that's the same."

We had a long drive—many a mile to go before we were near home. I couldn't talk; I didn't know what to say, for one thing. I could only feel as if I was being driven along the road to Heaven after coming from the other place. I couldn't help wondering whether it was possible that I was a free man going back to life and friends and happiness. Was it possible? Could I ever be happy again? Surely it must be a dream that would all melt away, and I'd wake up as I'd done hundreds of times and find myself on the floor of the cell, with the bare walls all round me.

When we got nearer the old place I began to feel that queer and strange that I didn't know which way to look. It was coming on for spring, and there'd been a middling drop of rain, seemingly, that had made the grass green and everything look grand. What a time had passed over since I thought whether it was spring, or summer, or winter! It didn't make much odds to me in there, only to drive me wild now and again with thinkin' of what was goin' on outside, and how I was caged up and like to be for months and years.

Things began little by little to look the way they used to do long and long ago. Now it was an old overhanging limb that had arched over the road since we were boys; then there was a rock with a big kurrajong tree growing near it. When we came to the turn off where we could see Nulla Mountain everything came

back to me. I seemed to have had two lives; the old one—then a time when I was dead, or next door to it—now this new life. I felt as if I was just born.

"We'll get down here now," I said, when we came near the dividing fence; "it ain't far to walk. That's your road."

"I'll run you up to the door," says he, "it isn't far; you ain't used to walking much."

He let out his horse and we trotted through the paddock up to the old hut.

"The garden don't look bad," says he. "Them peaches always used to bear well in the old man's time, and the apples and quinces too. Someone's had it took care on and tidied up a bit. There, you've got a friend or two left, old man. And I'm one, too," says he, putting out his hand and giving mine a shake. "There ain't anyone in these parts as 'll cast it up to you as long as you keep straight. You can look 'em all in the face now, and bygones 'll be bygones."

Then he touched up his horse and rattled off before I could so much as say "Thank ye."

I walked through the garden and sat down in the verandah on one of the old benches. There was the old place, mighty little altered considering. The hut had been mended up from time to time—now a slab and then a sheet of bark—else it would have been down long enough ago. The garden had been dug up, and the trees trimmed year by year. A hinge had been put on the old gate, and a couple of slip rails at the paddock. The potato patch at the bottom of the garden was sown, and there were vegetables coming on in the old beds. Someone had looked after the place; of course, I knew who it was.

It began to get coldish, and I pulled the latch—it was there just the same—and went into the old room. I almost expected to see mother in her chair, and father on the stool near the fireplace, where he used to sit and smoke his pipe. Aileen's was a little low chair near mother's. Jim and I used to be mostly in the verandah, unless it was very cold, and then we used to lie down in front of the fire—that is if dad was away, as he mostly was.

The room felt cold and dark as I looked in. So dreadful lonely too. I almost wished I was back in the gaol.

When I looked round again I could see things had been left ready for me, so as I wasn't to find myself bad off the first night. The fire was all made up ready to light, and matches on the table ready. The kettle was filled, and a basket close handy with a leg of mutton, and bread, butter, eggs, and a lot of things—enough to last me a week. The bedroom had been settled up, too, and there was a good, comfortable bed ready for any tired man to turn into. Better than all, there was a letter, signed "Your own Gracey," that made me think I might have some life left worth living yet.

I lit the fire, and after a bit made shift to boil some tea; and after I'd finished what little I could eat I felt better, and sat down before the fire to consider over things. It was late enough—midnight—before I turned in. I couldn't sleep then; but at last I must have dropped off, because the sun was shining into the room, through the old window with the broken shutter, when I awoke.

At first I didn't think of getting up. Then I knew, all of a sudden, that I could open the door and go out. I was in the garden in three seconds, listening to

the birds and watching the clouds rising over Nulla Mountain.

* * * * *

That morning, after breakfast, I saw two people, a man and a woman, come riding up to the garden gate. I knew who it was as far as I could see 'em—George Storefield and Gracey. He lifted her down, and they walked up through the garden. I went a step or two to meet them. She ran forward and threw herself into my arms. George turned away for a bit. Then I put her by, and told her to sit down on the verandah while I had a talk with George. He shook hands with me, and said he was glad to see me a free man again. "I've worked a bit, and got others to work too," says he; "mostly for her, and partly for your own sake, Dick. I can't forget old times. Now you're your own man again, and I won't insult you by saying I hope you'll keep so; I know it, as sure as we stand here."

"Look here, George," I said, "as there's a God in Heaven, no man shall ever be able to say a word against me again. I think more of what you've done for me almost than of poor Gracey's holding fast. It came natural to her. Once a woman takes to a man, it don't matter to her what he is. But if you'd thrown me off I'd not have blamed you. What's left of Dick Marston's life belongs to her and you."

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That day week Gracey and I were married, very quiet and private. We thought we'd have no one at the little church at Bargo but George and his wife, the old woman, and the chap as drove me home.

Just as we were going into the church who should come rattling up on horseback but Maddie Barnes and

her husband—Mrs. Moreton, as she was now, with a bright-looking boy of ten or eleven on a pony. She jumps off and gives the bridle to him. She looked just the same as ever, a trifle stouter, but the same saucy look about the eyes. “Well, Dick Marston,” says she, “how are you? Glad to see you, old man. You’ve got him safe at last, Gracey, and I wish you joy. You came to Bella’s wedding, Dick, and so I thought I’d come to yours, though you kept it so awful quiet. How d’ye think the old horse looks?”

“Why, it’s never Rainbow?” says I. “It’s twelve years and over since I saw him last.”

“I didn’t care if it was twenty,” said she. “Here he is, and goes as sound as a bell. His poor old teeth are getting done, but he ain’t the only one that way, is he, Joe? He’ll never die if I can keep him alive. I have to give him corn-meal, though, so as he can grind it easy.”

“I believe she thinks more of that old moke than me and the children all put together,” says Joe Moreton.

“And why shouldn’t I?” says Maddie, facing round at him just the old way. “Isn’t he the finest horse that ever stood on legs, and didn’t he belong to the finest gentleman that you or anyone else looked at? Don’t say a word against him, for I can’t stand it. I believe if you was to lay a whip across that old horse in anger I’d go away and leave you, Joe Moreton, just as if you was a regular black stranger. Poor Rainbow! Isn’t he a darling?” Here she stroked the old horse’s neck. He was rolling fat, and had a coat like satin. His legs were just as clean as ever, and he stood there as if he heard everything, moving his old head up and down the way he always did—never still a moment. It brought back old times, and I felt soft enough, I tell you. Maddie’s

lips were trembling again, too, and her eyes like two coals of fire. As for Joe, he said nothing more, and the best thing too. The boy led Rainbow over to the fence, and old George walked us all into church, and that settled things.

After the words were said we all went back to George's together, and Maddie and her husband drank a glass of wine to our health, and wished us luck. They rode as far as the turn off to Rocky Flat with us, and then took the Turon road.

"Good-bye, Dick," says Maddie, bending down over the old horse's neck. "You've got a stunning good wife now, if ever any man had in the whole world. Mind you're an A1 husband, or we'll all round on you, and you're life won't be worth having; and I've got the best horse in the country, haven't I? See where the bullet went through his poor neck. There's no lady in the land got one that's a patch on him. Steady, now, Rainbow, we'll be off in a minute. You shall see my little Jim there take him over a hurdle yard. He can ride a bit, as young as he is. Pity poor old Jim ain't here to-day, isn't it, Dick? Think of him being cold in his grave now, and we here. Well, it's no use crying, is it?"

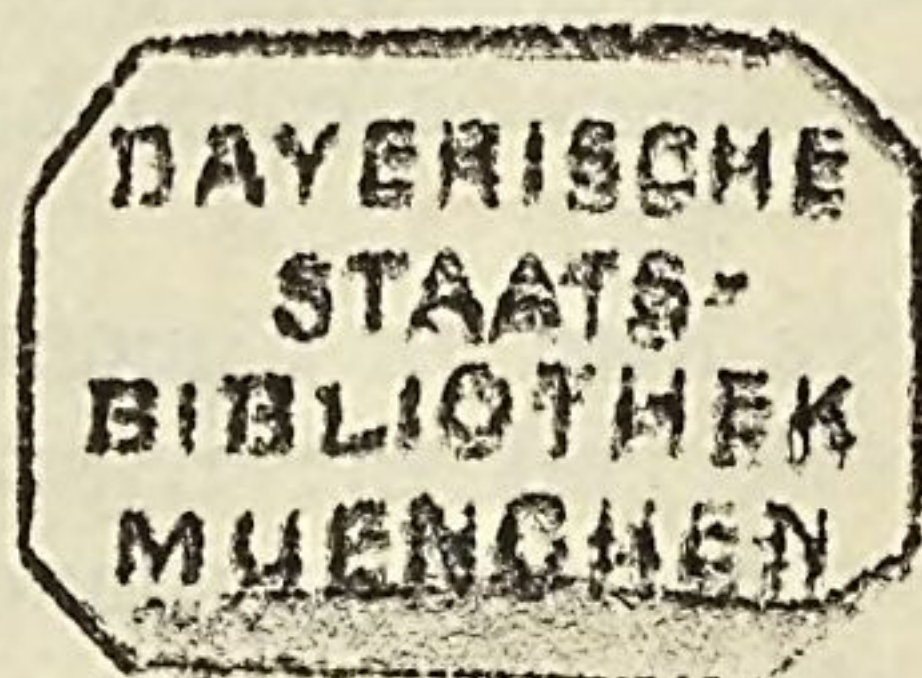
And off went Maddie at a pace that gave Joe and the boy all they knew to catch her.

* * * * *

We're to live here for a month or two till I get used to outdoor work and the regular old bush-life again. There's no life like it, to my fancy. Then we start, bag and baggage, for one of George's Queensland stations, right away up on the Barcoo, that I'm to manage and have a share in.

It freshens me up to think of making a start in a new country. It's a long way from where we were born and brought up; but all the better for that. Of course they'll know about me; but in any part of Australia, once a chap shows that he's given up cross-doings and means to go straight for the future, the people of the country will always lend him a helping hand, particularly if he's married to such a wife as Gracey. I'm not afraid of any of my troubles in the old days being cast up to me; and men are so scarce and hard to get west of the Barcoo that no one that once had Dick Marston's help at a muster is likely to remind him of such an old story as that of "Robbery Under Arms."

THE END.



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1872

March 1889.

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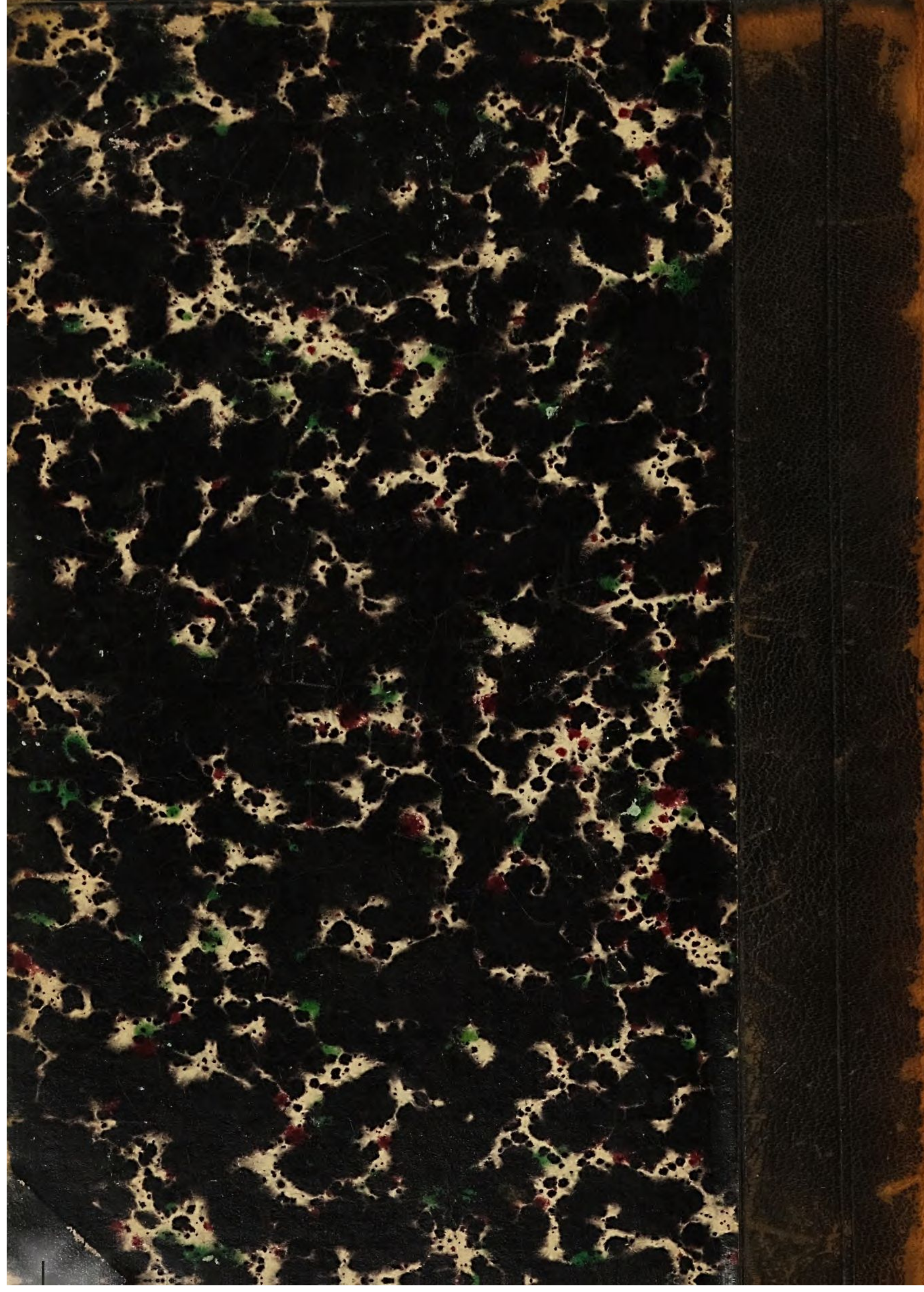
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